

### Eurocentrism and Christianity within Herman Melville's *Typee*

Herman Melville's written work, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, explores a native culture through the eyes of a white European male named Tommo. Tommo's outward, physical identity makes him an unignorable presence on the island as possibly the only white male the Typee tribe has ever seen (Melville, 74). Since Tommo is from a European culture, he brings privilege and familiarity with Eurocentric ways of being to the Typee tribe, including colonialism and Christianity. Throughout the course of *Typee*, Tommo begins to criticize the Eurocentric system of ideals as he becomes acquainted with the Typee culture; yet he is unable to overcome the weight of his societal indoctrination, ultimately falling back into the pattern of accepting Eurocentrism as superior.

During *Typee*, Tommo serves as a stranger in a native culture and has to take the time to acquaint himself with the practices of the inhabitants. Ultimately displaced, "[Tommo] finds himself trapped in a social system that he cannot read or interpret adequately" (Maleki). It is reinforced consistently throughout the book the drastic ways the Typee culture differs from both what Tommo is used to and what he expected; he is deeply unfamiliar with his surroundings and the practices that make up the culture he finds himself in. Moreover, Tommo recognizes that his understanding of the Typee's religious practices in particular is lacking when he says, "I am free to confess my almost entire inability to gratify any curiosity that may be felt with regard to the theology of the valley" (Melville, 171). By not falsely assuming the position of an expert, Tommo gives himself the opportunity to learn, or fail to learn, about the religious customs of the island. It is also through Tommo's acknowledgement of not knowing that the reader can identify that Tommo himself has curiosity about the religion which he cannot satisfy. A prime example of Tommo's curiosity about the Typee religion at its peak is in regards to the secluded mausoleum

of a former warrior chief. Given that Tommo has admitted his inability to understand the religion as a structure, he admits that “although [his] knowledge of the religious faith of the Typees was unavoidably limited, one of their superstitious observances with which [he] became acquainted interested [him] greatly” (Melville, 171). Although it is demeaning to refer to a religious observance as a superstition due to the negative connotations of the word, Tommo still acknowledges that he is undeniably curious about the matter. This is reinforced by the observations Tommo makes when he sees the mausoleum, particularly when he says, “the sanctity of the spot appeared never to have been violated. The stillness of the grave was there, and the calm solitude around was beautiful and touching” (Melville, 172). It is important to note that the undisturbed nature Tommo admires so much indicates that the site has been untouched by Europeans, colonization, and all the systems of practice that Tommo comes from. While Tommo does not defy Christianity in his observation of beauty in another culture’s religious site, his eagerness to learn more about the religious ground leads the reader to believe that Tommo is interested in exploring religion outside the confines of solely Christianity. This is only reinforced when Tommo notes that “whenever in the course of my rambles through the valley I happened to be near the chief’s mausoleum, I always turned aside to visit it. The place had a peculiar charm for me; I hardly know why; but so it was” (Melville, 173). It is arguable that the peculiar charm Tommo attributes to the mausoleum is partially, if not solely, due to his desire to explore religion without the presence of Christianity.

The reader can observe Tommo’s willingness to set aside the beliefs that have been historically reinforced when examining how he works to dismantle the stigma provided by Christianity about the island’s religious practices. In a moment of reflection in regards to what he had previously heard about the Typee’s spiritual practices, Tommo notes that, “I should certainly

be led to suppose that [Christians/Europeans] had exaggerated the evils of Paganism, in order to enhance the merit of their own disinterested labors” (Melville, 169). Given the fact that 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europeans predominantly belonged to some sector of the Christian faith, Tommo’s ridicule of Christianity’s attempts to bring down Paganism is especially profound. If Christianity is the end-all-be-all within one’s mind, it is rare for one to acknowledge the ways in which it has or is failing them. Tommo takes his statement one step further by providing proof of the misgivings Christianity and European culture has provided him about the Typee. He notes that:

“These accounts are likewise calculated to leave upon the reader’s mind an impression that human victims are cooked and served up upon the altars; that heathenish cruelties of every description are continually practiced; and that these ignorant Pagans are in a state of the extremest wretchedness in consequence of the grossness of their superstitions. [...] Now, all I can say is, that in all my excursions through the valley of Typee, I never saw any of these alleged enormities” (Melville, 170).

By acknowledging the lies he has heard about the Typee and affirming that he has never witnessed any of the behaviors he was previously convinced were their defining characteristics, Tommo casts doubt on Christianity. Tommo is seeing firsthand the ways of Typee life at odds with the narrative Christianity and those associated with it spun, causing him to doubt what has always been believed as tried and true. While Tommo’s denial of the cultural practices allows him to question Christianity, it also allows him to potentially buy into the Typee religion, as it does not match the horrifying image he initially thought it to be. A particular moment of growth in which Tommo recognizes his internal religious identity and privilege occurs when Tommo is at the mausoleum site and sees an idol he is interested in. Tommo notes that “[he] drew near to inspect more closely this strange object of idolatry; but halted reverently at the distance of two or three paces, out of regard to the religious prejudices of my valet” (Melville, 178). By respecting

something sacred to Kory-Kory, Tommo inadvertently acknowledges his position as an outsider both in the community and specifically in the religion. Moreover, his curiosity in the idol shows a desire to understand an unfamiliar religious object, which demonstrates the leaning away from Christianity. Through the venture of exploring the Typee religion as an outsider, Tommo attempts “[to penetrate] a substantial reality, a reality untainted by Western ideologies” (Nownes). It is through this quest for truth on Tommo’s – and by extension, Melville’s – part that the reader is able to inspect the flaws of the system of ideologies that implicitly claims they are superior.

Tommo may negate the false ideas Christianity had propagated about those who practiced the Typee religion, but he remains unable to fully invest himself in the religion and even goes as far as to minimize it. It could be argued that Tommo merely adopts the Typee religion as a system he can exoticize and adopt when he pleases. This is reinforced when Tommo says, “I loved to yield myself up to the fanciful superstition of the islanders” (Melville, 173). Tommo’s privilege is extremely apparent through this statement, in that it proves that he is able to step in and out of religions and cultures without commitment or subsequent consequences, while for those who live and are invested in this community, this is their way of life and the system in which their beliefs rest upon. Although Tommo is, admittedly, allowing himself to learn from the culture, the result is exoticization. This is further emphasized when considering that for Tommo to exoticize is for him to “[make the Typees] knowable and controllable” (Iverson, 127). While Exoticization ultimately dehumanizes those being subjected to it, as they become romanticized caricatures rather than being viewed as human beings. This, further, allows Tommo to assert his control in that he is the one who is watching, while the Typee are the ones being watched. This results in “an exploitative view of an alien culture in terms of its usability” (Breitwieser, 398).

It is only through the value Tommo assumes he can reap from the Typee tribe that he finds them worth his time. He sees them as the antithesis of everything he's ever known, and uses the Typee as a vehicle to criticize the preexisting systems while remaining within them in order to further profit. He dances between two cultures, refusing to immerse himself in either.

A lingering sign that Tommo is unable to escape Western ideology is indicated by Tommo's inability to recognize the Typee tribe's religious practices as legitimate. While the Typee would understandably take their religious practices very seriously, Tommo can only see them as childish because their practices do not hold the same element of sophistication and order that Christianity does. This is demonstrated when Tommo says that, "In fact, religious affairs in Typee were at a very low ebb: all such matters sat very lightly upon the thoughtless inhabitants; [...] they appeared merely to seek a sort of childish amusement" (Melville, 174). While it is possible that the goals of the Typee in pursuing their religion are delight, Tommo's describing of the Typee as "thoughtless" and "childish" demeans both the people who practice the religion and the religion itself. He holds this view because it differs from his perception of what religion should look like, without considering that the Eurocentric model of religion may not be the ideal. Tommo once again insults the Typee and portrays their spiritual practices as childish when observing the interaction with Moa Artua. Tommo compares the ritual to "like those of a parcel of children playing with dolls and baby houses" (Melville, 176). By depicting the Typee and their spiritual practices as childish, Tommo seemingly implies that the Typee religion is inferior because it displays less maturity, measured in comparison to Eurocentric religions. This holds particularly damaging implications when considering how this could be further extended to mean that Western civilization is superior to all else because of societal "advancement" and perceptions of maturity. Furthermore, Melville's, and consequently Tommo's, description of the

religious site and Kory-Kory's idol comes at the cost of "appropriating them on behalf of the European reader" (Iverson, 121). So, even though Tommo's exploration of the mausoleum seemingly indicates a crack in the façade that Christianity the only religion that matters, his exploration is proven to be limited in that it remains within the confines of Western ideology. Tommo proceeds to project his ignorance disguised as confusion onto the Typee when he notes that he is "inclined to believe, that the islanders in the Pacific have no fixed and definite ideas whatever on the subject of religion" (Melville, 177). Considering how Tommo admits he is unable to understand the religion himself, it feels premature to claim that those who have practiced the religion for as long as they have been alive actually have no idea what they believe in. Moreover, Tommo is not in the position to make this claim on behalf of another who cannot speak for themselves in the text at hand, and his statement ultimately displays his inability to let go of Western ideals.

Any progress Tommo initially made in distancing himself from Eurocentrism seems to be lost when Tommo deems the Typees as "a back-slidden generation [...] sunk in religious sloth, and [requiring] a spiritual revival" and goes on to call them "remiss in the performance of their higher obligations" and "altogether too light-hearted and lazy" (Melville, 179). This is arguably the greatest combination of insults Tommo could apply to the Typee, given the degree of pride they take in their culture and the way of life they've built for themselves. It is also particularly insulting when considering the way the Typee tribe as a whole has welcomed Tommo into their culture, shown him their practices, and allowed him to live in the comfort, all despite the fact that he arrived as an unwelcomed stranger. Ultimately, Melville and the narrative as a whole "[dismisses] the 'savage' lifestyle as an unviable alternative to the Anglo-European civilizational model that Tommo, the narrator, represents" (Lawrence, 62). Considering that the reader spends

the majority of the time in the narrative with the understanding that the Typee tribe may serve as an idyllic civilization, to turn the narrative around to frame the Typee as savage and the Europeans as superior and civilized is particularly offensive. This begs the question to the reader that if this was the intention of the writing all along, why Melville explored the possibility of anything else in the first place.

Throughout *Typee*, Melville allows the reader to assert a colonial gaze over an untouched culture, criticizing it through the lens of Eurocentric standards. *Typee* has been branded as “strongly Anglophilic” and “so egregiously pro-British” in that it falls into the systematic patterns of Westernized ideological thinking (Buell, 219). Melville specifically crafted *Typee* with a Western audience in mind, and therefore was required to translate his experiences into easily digestible stories that Europeans could understand and respect. *Typee* has further been described as:

“...a self-styled Yankee narrative got up, however, in a special effort to ingratiate itself with a British publisher and public and then remade so as to address a different problem of reception back home. The Preface, purporting to speak the ‘unvarnished truth,’ seems to have been designed to help market the book in Britain by appeasing both the publisher's and the public's demand for a factual narrative” (Buell, 219).

It is reasonable for a reader to assume, given this statement and the knowledge that Melville's goal in publishing was to make a profit, that the narrative has been tainted by expectations. Those expectations being that if Melville were to produce a narrative for the larger public that would sell, it would have to be produced with popular opinions in mind and few controversial opinions expressed. This begs the question of truth within the narrative and to what extent Melville ever believed what he wrote in the novel that defined him.

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