

Typee
Herman Melville (1846)

White American author Herman Melville is known today for his novel Moby Dick, but he first became famous for the now lesser known book Typee. Typee is a non-fictional, though possibly embellished, account of some of Melville's travels as a sailor in the Pacific. The book's title is the name of a valley on Nuku Hiva, the largest of the Marquesas Islands, which later became part of French Polynesia. In the two selections presented below, Melville paints an idyllic picture of indigenous Marquesan society while criticizing Western civilization and Christian missionaries. These passages proved too controversial for publishers; although included in the first edition, the passages were omitted from subsequent editions during Melville's lifetime. The only material presented below that survived past the first edition is what appears (excerpted here for brevity) in the paragraph beginning "There seemed to be no cares..."

As I extended my wanderings in the valley and grew more familiar with the habits of its inmates, I was fain to confess that despite the disadvantages of his condition, the Polynesian savage, surrounded by all the luxurious provisions of nature, enjoyed an infinitely happier, though certainly a less intellectual, existence than the self-complacent European.

The naked wretch who shivers beneath the bleak skies and starves among the inhospitable wilds of Terra-del-Fuego might indeed be made happier by civilization, for it would alleviate his physical wants. But the voluptuous Indian, with every desire supplied, whom Providence has bountifully provided with all the sources of pure and natural enjoyment and from whom are removed so many of the ills and pains of life—what has he to desire at the hands of Civilization? She may “cultivate his mind,” may “elevate his thoughts”—these, I believe, are the established phrases—but will he be the happier? Let the once smiling and populous Hawaiian Islands, with their now diseased, starving, and dying natives, answer the question. The missionaries may seek to disguise the matter as they will, but the facts are incontrovertible, and the devoutest Christian who visits that group with an unbiased mind must go away mournfully asking, “Are these—alas!—the fruits of twenty-five years of enlightening?” [...]

The fiend-like skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train are enough, of themselves, to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth. [...] The term “savage” is, I conceive, often misapplied; and indeed, when I consider the vices, cruelties, and enormities of every kind that spring up in the tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilization, I am inclined to think that so far as the relative wickedness of the parties is concerned, four or five Marquesan Islanders sent to the United States as missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans dispatched to the Islands in a similar capacity. [...]

There seemed to be no cares, griefs, troubles, or vexations in all Typee. [...] There were none of those thousand sources of irritation that the ingenuity of civilized man has created to mar his own felicity. There were no foreclosures of mortgages [...]; no poor relations, everlastingly occupying the spare bedchamber and diminishing the elbow room at the family table; no destitute widows,

with their children, starving on the cold charities of the world; no beggars; no debtors' prisons [...] In this secluded abode of happiness, there were no cross old women, no cruel stepdames, no withered spinsters, no lovesick maidens, no sour old bachelors, no inattentive husbands, no melancholy young men, no blubbing youngsters, and no squalling brats. All was mirth, fun, and high good humor. [...] There you might have seen a throng of young females, not filled with envyings of each other's charms, nor displaying the ridiculous affectations of gentility, nor yet moving in whalebone corsets, like so many automatons, but free, inartificially happy, and unconstrained. [...] With the young men, there seemed almost always some matter of diversion or business on hand that afforded a constant variety of enjoyment. But whether fishing, or carving canoes, or polishing their ornaments, never was there exhibited the least sign of strife or contention among them.

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The penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee, for with the one solitary exception of striking a light, I scarcely saw any piece of work performed there which caused the sweat to stand upon a single brow. As for digging and delving for a livelihood, the thing is altogether unknown. Nature has planted the breadfruit and the banana, and in her own good time she brings them to maturity, when the idle savage stretches forth his hand and satisfies his appetite.

Ill-fated people! I shudder when I think of the change a few years will produce in their paradisaical abode [...] Heaven help the "isles of the sea"! The sympathy which Christendom feels for them has—alas!—in too many instances proved their bane.

How little do some of these poor islanders comprehend, when they look around them, that no inconsiderable part of their disasters originates in certain tea-party excitements, under the influence of which benevolent-looking gentlemen in white cravats solicit alms, and old ladies in spectacles and young ladies in sober russet gowns contribute sixpences towards the creation of a fund, the object of which is to ameliorate the spiritual condition of the Polynesians, but whose end has almost invariably been to accomplish their temporal destruction! [...] The Anglo-Saxon hive have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion of the Red race. Civilization is gradually sweeping from the earth the lingering vestiges of Paganism and, at the same time, the shrinking forms of its unhappy worshippers.

Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the images overturned, the temples demolished, and the idolaters converted into *nominal* Christians than disease, vice, and premature death make their appearance. The depopulated land is then recruited from the rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals who settle themselves within its borders and clamorously announce the progress of the Truth. Neat villas, trim gardens, shaven lawns, spires, and cupolas arise, while the poor savage soon finds himself an interloper in the country of his fathers, and that too on the very site of the hut where he was born. The spontaneous fruits of the earth, which God in his wisdom had ordained for the support of the indolent natives, remorselessly seized upon and appropriated by the stranger, are devoured before the eyes of the starving inhabitants or sent on board the numerous vessels which now touch at their shores.

When the famished wretches are cut off in this manner from their natural supplies, they are told by their benefactors to work and earn their support by the sweat of their brows! But to no fine gentleman born to hereditary opulence does this manual labor come more unkindly than to the luxurious Indian when thus robbed of the bounty of heaven. Habituated to a life of indolence, he cannot and will not exert himself; and want, disease, and vice, all evils of foreign growth, soon terminate his miserable existence.

But what matters all this? Behold the glorious result! The abominations of Paganism have given way to the pure rites of the Christian worship; the ignorant savage has been supplanted by the refined European! Look at Honolulu, the metropolis of the Sandwich Islands! A community of disinterested merchants and devoted self-exiled heralds of the Cross, located on the very spot that twenty years ago was defiled by the presence of idolatry. What a subject for an eloquent Bible-meeting orator! Nor has such an opportunity for a display of missionary rhetoric been allowed to pass by unimproved! But when these philanthropists send us such glowing accounts of one half of their labors, why does their modesty restrain them from publishing the other half of the good they have wrought? Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draft horses and evangelized into beasts of burden. But so it is. They have been literally broken into the traces and are harnessed to the vehicles of their spiritual instructors like so many dumb brutes!

Among a multitude of similar exhibitions that I saw, I shall never forget a robust, red-faced, and very ladylike personage, a missionary's spouse, who day after day, for months together, took her regular airings in a little go-cart drawn by two of the islanders, one an old gray-headed man and the other a roguish stripling, both being, with the exception of the fig leaf, as naked as when they were born. Over a level piece of ground, this pair of *draft* bipeds would go with a shambling, unsightly trot, the youngster hanging back all the time like a knowing horse, while the old hack plodded on and did all the work.

Rattling along through the streets of the town in this stylish equipage, the lady looks about her as magnificently as any queen driven in state to her coronation. A sudden elevation and a sandy road, however, soon disturb her serenity. The small wheels become embedded in the loose soil—the old stager stands tugging and sweating, while the young one frisks about and does nothing; not an inch does the chariot budge. Will the tenderhearted lady, who has left friends and home for the good of the souls of the poor heathen, will she think a little about their bodies and get out and ease the wretched old man until the ascent is mounted? Not she; she could not dream of it. To be sure, she used to think nothing of driving the cows to pasture on the old farm in New England; but times have changed since then. So she retains her seat and bawls out, "*Hookee! hookee!*" ("Pull, pull"). The old gentleman, frightened at the sound, labors away harder than ever, and the younger one makes a great show of straining himself but takes care to keep one eye on his mistress in order to know when to dodge out of harm's way. At last the good lady loses all patience: "*Hookee! hookee!*" and *rap* goes the heavy handle of her huge fan over the naked skull of the old savage, while the young one shies to one side and keeps beyond its range. "*Hookee! hookee!*" again she cries—"Hookee tata kannaka!" ("Pull strong, men")—but all in vain, and she is obliged in the end to dismount and, sad necessity, actually to walk to the top of the hill.

At the town where this paragon of humility resides is a spacious and elegant American chapel,

where divine service is regularly performed. Twice every Sabbath, towards the close of the exercises, may be seen a score or two of little wagons ranged along the railing in front of the edifice, with two squalid native footmen, in the livery of nakedness, standing by each and waiting for the dismissal of the congregation to draw their superiors home. [...]

In a word, here, as in every case where Civilization has in any way been introduced among those whom we call savages, she has scattered her vices and withheld her blessings.

Source: Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, 1st US ed. (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), 157-161, 249-254 (chaps. 17, 26), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t9r20sn2s>. Public domain.

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