

ANALYSIS

Omoo (1847)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“One can revel in such richly good-natured style.... We therefore recommend this ‘narrative of adventure in the south seas’ as thorough entertainment—not so light as to be tossed aside for its flippancy, nor so profound as to be tiresome.”

Walt Whitman
Brooklyn Daily Eagle
(5 May 1847)

“*Omoo* is a fascinating book: picaresque, rascally, roving. Melville as a bit of a beachcomber. The crazy ship *Julia* sails to Tahiti, and the mutinous crew are put ashore. Put in the Tahitian prison. It is good reading. Perhaps Melville is at his best, his happiest, in *Omoo*. For once he is really reckless.... For once he is really careless, roving with that scamp, Doctor Long Ghost. For once he is careless of his actions, careless of his morals, careless of his ideals: ironic, as the epicurean must be.... But it was under the influence of the Long Doctor. This long and bony Scotsman was not a mere ne'er-do-well. He was a man of humorous desperation, throwing his life ironically away.... He let his ship drift rudderless.... When he saw a white man really ‘gone savage,’ a white man with a blue shark tattooed over his brow, gone over to the savages, then Herman’s whole being revolted. He couldn’t bear it.”

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(1923; Doubleday 1953)

“The play of fantasy in *Omoo* takes the form not of nightmarishness or even of daydreaming but of an easy and emotionally liberating current of humorous narrative, always slightly in excess, as one sees with half an eye, of the sober autobiographical facts. It usually has the satisfactory effect of throwing a ludicrous light on the representatives of order and authority—captains and mates, consuls and missionaries, resident physicians and native constables. There is still, as a result, an emotional release in reading *Omoo*, as in reading any such book; we take our own revenge on respectability by contemplating the discomfiture of the feeble Captain Guy and the bullying consul Wilson, or by listening to the wily sermon of the Chadband whom Melville describes himself as hearing in the church at Papeete....

In the period when he was writing *Typee* and *Omoo*, it was mostly the amusing, even lovable oddities and humors of human character that engaged him, not its darkneses and depravities.... Only one personage among them all is painted at full length; this is the demoted ship’s surgeon, Long Ghost, who is the real protagonist of *Omoo* (Melville himself is the protagonist of *Typee*), and who embodies the complete foot-looseness, the perfect irresponsibility, which Melville, on one side of his nature, would have liked to attain. A ruined gentleman, well-read and well-mannered, but lazy, mischievous, reckless, amorous, and rascally, Long Ghost appears in the forecandle of the *Julie* as if he were a personal materialization of all Melville’s longings for a really unbraced and ungirded freedom. So long as the mood lasts, Long Ghost sticks by his side, a perfect companion, indeed another self, but at length the mood passes, the fundamental seriousness in Melville reasserts itself, and about to join the crew of the *Leviathan* he takes leave both of the waggish doctor and, to all intents and purposes, of the beachcomber in himself....

The gesture has an almost allegorical quality. Lighthearted and unprofound as on the whole they are, *Typee* and *Omoo* have an undertone of serious meaning. Taken together they tell the story of a quest or pilgrimage--a pilgrimage not, certainly, ‘from this world to that which is to come,’ but from the world of enlightened rationality, technical progress, and cultural complexity... He returned to civilization in the end, but he had had a long gaze at a simpler, freer, gayer, and yet also statelier mode of life, and this was to

serve him in memory, as a stabilizing and fortifying image.... In touching the body of Fayaway, Melville had regained contact with the almost vanished life of myth.”

Newton Arvin
“The Early Novels”: *Typee, Omoo, Redburn, White-Jacket*
Herman Melville
(William Sloane 1950)

“He resumes his interrupted tale after his rescue from the Typees by a vessel designated the Julia and commanded by Captain Guy—a pair of names which reecho from *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* [Poe]. Omoo, whose misadventures can be documented by Melville’s at this stage, joins a crew which is on the verge of mutiny, participates in their protest, and shares their punishment: they are taken ashore to irons and imprisoned. The island itself, so much exploited as a colonial outpost, has become a corrupting limbo between two worlds, both of which shore their cultural debris at the slatternly court of the barefoot queen.... The polemic against Protestant missions goes on, with the bibulous Father Murphy upholding the decencies. Shady Europeans, jailbirds and beachcombers, are concretely measured and found wanting by native standards of beauty. ‘A dark complexion...in a man is highly esteemed, as indicating strength of both body and soul... *Omoo*...concerns itself with character rather than race, with society rather than scenery.”

Harry Levin
The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville
(Knopf/Vintage 1958) 173-74

“*Omoo* was the Polynesian word for ‘wanderer’ or ‘beachcomber.’ The ‘story,’ or the materials, of *Omoo* were essentially those which Melville himself had experienced on the *Lucy Ann* and seen during his carefree imprisonment in the calaboose on Tahiti, his wandering about that island, and his escape to Moorea. The same readers who had relished *Typee* had similar praise for *Omoo* so that the first edition of 3,500 copies sold out in the first week. Once again there were objections to *Omoo* from those journals sympathetic to the missionary movement: in *Omoo* Melville’s remarks had become even sharper as he exposed the life of the Tahiti natives, caught between the old Pagan morality of their carefree ancestors and the strict and prudish tradition imposed upon their easily-dominated minds by the strong-willed and deeply-convinced missionaries who had come to them with the flaming sword of truth. Here was the clash of two ways of life which could never comfortably live together, and Melville exposed that discomfort....

In *Omoo*, Melville tells of the arrival of his whale ship in Tahiti, to anchor beside the looming battleship of the French fleet, which was at that moment completing its ‘conquest’ or domination of the Society Islands.... Captain Cook had discovered and described the paradises of the Pacific in the 1770s. During succeeding decades sailors and whalers had ravaged many of the islands with western diseases, especially with venereal disease and smallpox, to which the Polynesians had no immunity; later the missionaries had invaded the islands... Melville described the political rape which would complete the destruction of Polynesian purity.

Melville saw...the three stages of Polynesian degradation. The Typee natives were virtually unspoiled, true Noble Savages, of a physical beauty unsurpassed in the world, and with a gentle, childlike way of life marred only by tribal warfares and, occasionally, by ritual cannibalism practiced on the slain enemy. In Tahiti, Melville saw the natives in a half-way stage of westernization. In Hawaii westernization had gone so far that Melville was disgusted not so much with the natives as with their spoilers.... So in *Omoo* he had acerbic comments to make on the relativity of terms like ‘savage’ and ‘civilized.’ Here was a proper subject for sardonic satire... Americans could read his attack...for Polynesia, or read backwards for ‘Indian,’ or read forward for interplanetary space.”

Howard P. Vincent
Guide to Herman Melville
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 11-14

Michael Hollister (2014)