



Idealised Indian Image In The Novels Of Herman Melville

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Abstract

This article examines Herman Melville's representation of indigenous peoples—both Native Americans and Polynesians—in novels such as *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Moby-Dick* (1851), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Using literary analysis, historical context, and postcolonial theory, the study argues that Melville frequently idealises indigenous figures as noble, pure, or morally superior, yet simultaneously complicates these portrayals by highlighting colonial violence, cultural misunderstanding, and extinction. While *Typee* and *Omoo* romanticise Polynesians as uncorrupted “children of nature,” *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man* offer ambivalent portraits of Native Americans that oscillate between idealisation and critique of American expansionist ideology. Ultimately, Melville's indigenous characters are not simply stereotypes but tools through which he critiques Western civilization, colonialism, and racial prejudice.

Keywords

Herman Melville, idealised Indian, Native Americans, Polynesians, noble savage, colonialism, postcolonial criticism.

Introduction

The 19th century in America was marked by territorial expansion, colonial encounters, and racial debates, all of which shaped literary depictions of indigenous peoples. Herman Melville (1819–1891), best known for *Moby-Dick*, was also an author of travel romances (*Typee*, *Omoo*) and satirical works (*The Confidence-Man*) that grappled with issues of race, civilization, and cultural contact. In these novels, Melville frequently creates idealised images of “Indians”—whether Polynesian islanders or Native Americans—portraying them as morally pure, courageous, or symbolically elevated. Yet, his portrayals are not uncritical: alongside idealisation, Melville reveals the destructive forces of colonialism, missionary zeal, and racial prejudice. This article explores how Melville constructs and employs the idealised Indian image, asking: how does idealisation function in his narratives? Does it reinforce stereotypes, or does it serve a critical, even subversive, purpose?

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated Melville's representations of indigenous peoples.

In *Typee* and *Omoo*, critics like Malini Johar Schueller argue that Melville resists colonial narratives by sympathetically portraying Polynesians as generous, harmonious, and spiritually rich, though he still frames them through the Western gaze (Schueller, n.d.).

In *Moby-Dick*, Tashtego, a Native American harpooner, has been read as embodying dignity and skill, representing the “last remnant” of his people (Matterson, 1996). His presence symbolises both noble heritage and cultural disappearance.

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville’s “Indian-hating” chapters satirise American violence against Native Americans, exposing how Indian-hating became central to national identity (McDonnell, 2020; Matterson, 1996).

Scholars note that idealisation in Melville often functions ambivalently: it elevates indigenous characters morally but also romanticises their “vanishing,” thus reflecting broader 19th-century anxieties (Schueller, n.d.; McDonnell, 2020).

Together, this scholarship suggests Melville’s indigenous figures are not merely romantic stereotypes but complex literary tools for critiquing Western civilization and its colonial project.

Methods

This study employs qualitative literary analysis, combining:

Close reading of passages in *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Confidence-Man*.

Thematic and symbolic analysis, identifying how idealisation functions in depictions of indigenous characters.

Historical contextualisation, situating Melville’s novels within 19th-century discourses of Manifest Destiny, colonial expansion, and racial theory.

Postcolonial frameworks, drawing on concepts of othering, noble savagery, and national memory to understand the ambivalence of Melville’s portrayals.

Discussion

1. Polynesians in *Typee* and *Omoo*: Romanticised Children of Nature

In his early travel romances, Melville depicts Polynesians as living in a state of natural abundance, generosity, and innocence. In *Typee*, the islanders are described as beautiful, hospitable, and free from the corruption of European society. Their lifestyle appears idyllic, contrasting sharply with the greed and violence of Western colonisers (Schueller, n.d.). Similarly, in *Omoo*, Melville highlights Polynesians’ communal bonds and resilience, presenting them as morally superior to Europeans who exploit the islands. These depictions clearly idealise Polynesians as noble savages, yet Melville also critiques missionary interference and colonial hypocrisy, complicating the romantic image.

2. Tashtego in *Moby-Dick*: The Last Remnant

In *Moby-Dick*, Tashtego, a Gay Head Indian, is portrayed as courageous, skillful, and dignified, embodying virtues associated with his Native heritage. Melville writes that Tashtego “inherited the unvitiated blood of those proud warrior hunters” (Melville, 1851/1988). This description idealises him as a heroic figure connected to a noble past. However, Tashtego’s status as one of the last of his people simultaneously evokes loss, extinction, and the violence of colonisation (Matterson, 1996). Thus, idealisation functions both as admiration and as elegy.

3. Indian-Hating in *The Confidence-Man*: Satire of American Violence

Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857) addresses the cultural myth of “Indian-hating.” The novel includes satirical stories of frontiersmen who justify extreme violence against Native Americans, exposing the hypocrisy and brutality underlying American expansion (McDonnell, 2020). Here, the “Indian” is not idealised directly but becomes a symbolic figure through which

Melville critiques national identity. By ironically invoking the trope of noble yet doomed Indians, Melville reveals how their idealisation masks systemic genocide and dispossession.

4. Function of Idealisation

Across these works, idealisation serves multiple purposes:

Moral critique: Indigenous characters embody virtues (generosity, courage, purity) that highlight Western corruption.

Symbolic contrast: Indians and Polynesians serve as mirrors to reveal flaws in white civilization.

Elegiac function: Idealisation often accompanies narratives of loss, reinforcing the “vanishing Indian” trope.

Subversion: By elevating indigenous figures, Melville unsettles stereotypes and critiques the violence of colonialism.

Conclusion

Melville’s novels demonstrate a persistent ambivalence in the representation of indigenous peoples. In *Typee* and *Omoo*, Polynesians are idealised as pure, harmonious, and morally superior, though framed through romanticised Western perspectives. In *Moby-Dick*, Tashtego is elevated as a heroic remnant of a noble lineage, yet also symbolises the tragic disappearance of Native Americans. In *The Confidence-Man*, the discourse of Indian-hating is satirised to reveal the violence embedded in American identity. These depictions reveal Melville’s deep engagement with the contradictions of 19th-century racial thought: idealisation coexists with critique, producing portraits that are simultaneously romantic, symbolic, and critical.

Melville’s use of the idealised Indian image thus cannot be dismissed as mere stereotype. Instead, it operates as a literary strategy that both reflects the anxieties of his time and challenges readers to confront the moral costs of colonialism and civilization.

References

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