Biography and Broken Barriers: Melville’s Use of Personal Experience and Social Groups to Achieve Commentary in *Typee* and *Redburn*

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This project was created for a section of ENGL 4997: Capstone devoted to the life and work of Herman Melville.
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Abstract:

Melville’s texts continue to be relevant to a contemporary readership well over a century since original publication, as his words not only illuminate and examine nineteenth century experiences, but also present concepts and ideas that continue to be worthy of consideration by modern audiences. One such issue that is regularly addressed in Melville’s works is that of identity: of the individual, of society, and of the individual as he navigates between the fabrics of various social worlds. This paper examines Social Identity Theory and its components that both achieve identification of the individual and the aggregate in society and define boundaries between social groups. In conjunction with Social Identity Theory, this paper draws from Melville’s own background and identify parallels between his personal history and his published works. Using these elements, along with an examination of the role of setting, I analyze the protagonists of two of Melville’s texts – *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Redburn* (1849) – and assert that these characters and their circular journeys, which frequently stray from the social roles and identities ascribed to them, are reflections of Melville’s personal experiences and ideologies. Furthermore, I argue that the protagonists and the plots in which they function are vehicles of Melville’s social commentary for a nineteenth-century readership.

Keywords: Herman Melville, *Typee*, *Redburn*, Social Identity Theory
In the discussion of great American authors and literature, Herman Melville and his array of literary works are frequently noted. Melville’s texts continue to be relevant to a contemporary readership well over a century since original publication, as his words not only illuminate and examine nineteenth-century experiences, but also present concepts and ideas that continue to be worthy of consideration by modern audiences. One such issue that is regularly addressed in Melville’s works is that of identity: of the individual, of society, and of the individual as he navigates between the fabrics of various social worlds. This paper will examine Social Identity Theory and its components that both achieve identification of the individual and the aggregate in society and define boundaries between social groups. In conjunction with Social Identity Theory, this paper will draw from Melville’s own background and identify parallels between his personal history and his published works. Using these elements, along with an examination of the role of setting, I will analyze the protagonists of two of Melville’s texts – *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), and *Redburn* (1849) – and assert that these characters and their circular journeys, which frequently stray from the social roles and identities ascribed to them, are reflections of Melville’s personal experiences and ideologies. Furthermore, I will argue that the protagonists and the plots in which they function are vehicles of Melville’s social commentary for a nineteenth-century readership.

To better examine the texts and the identities of their protagonists, I will employ Social Identity Theory, which states that “people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort” (Ashforth 1). This system of categorization accomplishes a dual purpose of defining both others and oneself based upon social qualities and criteria that emerge and distinguish one group of people from another; it is an avenue to define oneself, to define the environment, and to
define oneself as belonging to a particular aggregate of the environment. Furthermore, as a logical consequence of social identification, individuals are defined by their belongingness to an “ingroup,” a segment of society with which one strongly identifies, and their lack of belongingness to other “outgroups,” those segments with which one fails to identify (Giles 142). These groups are established and maintained through language, behavior, and the traditions of culture, aspects that present individuals with opportunities to be transient between numerous social sectors – ingroups and outgroups alike – thereby allowing a particular identity to emerge as dominant in the moment.

Melville’s texts Typee and Redburn and, more specifically, the respective protagonists of Tommo and Wellingborough Redburn, present conflicts and challenges to Social Identity Theory and its aforementioned parameters. Tommo and Redburn each deviate from their ascribed social belongingness over the course of their individual experiences, identifying at varying points with the dominant ingroups, the inferior outgroups, and additional social groups that exist vaguely in between the two, thus raising questions regarding the significance of their shifting identities. Melville reinforces this quality of his protagonists by establishing settings – both physical surroundings and the nature of the characters present in these surroundings – which reiterate the conflicts and themes central to the respective texts while further revealing and developing the characters of Tommo and Redburn (“The Functions of Setting”).

Melville’s careful establishment of character and setting, not coincidentally, mirrors numerous aspects of his personal life and the social and political ideologies of the society for whom he wrote. Michael Paul Rogin states in Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville (1979):
Melville’s fiction responds to the central historical and public issues of his time, rather than to typical, private existence. Melville was realist in his attention to a political rhetoric which, in the literary definition of that term, was itself not realist. Unlike that public language, however, Melville’s version of American history was no celebratory romance. Interpreting the political vocabulary that engendered it, his fiction reconnected the political romance to society and the psyche. (Rogin 41)

Thus, the texts of *Typee* and *Redburn* can be read as fictionalized projections of Melville’s life experiences and nineteenth-century ideologies. Furthermore, the portrayal of those things contradictory to widely held popular beliefs can therefore be interpreted as Melville asserting explicit – and sometimes harsh – social commentary and critique. The use of settings that force Tommo and Redburn from the comfort and familiarity of their respective ingroups into foreign outgroups assists this criticism in the creation of cyclical journeys for the protagonists, and thus cyclical journeys for the audience as well. This further creates commentary; in subjecting Tommo and Redburn – and readers – to circular stories that leave them at the same point at which they started, Melville reminds the readership that broken social realities persist, and poses the challenge to confront and solve these social problems.

Melville’s first published novel, *Typee*, is a travel and adventure account that draws from Melville’s own experiences to create the setting of the South Pacific island of Nukuheva. As the narrative progresses, two distinct groups begin to emerge; speaking broadly, these groups can be identified as ‘whites’ and ‘natives,’ which can be further dichotomized as colonizer and colonized, and civilized and savage, group identities that Melville subverts throughout the plot.
Melville achieves construction of social group identities is achieved primarily through character language and behavior, specifically through word of mouth spread by the characters; it is through the recounted stories of returned white sailors that the native Typee image and identity is created as one of “lover[s] of human flesh…the natives of all this group are irreclaimable cannibals” (Typee 24). It is therefore all the more interesting then that the language of Tommo, the protagonist of Typee, so often conflicts with the dialogue and stories he has previously encountered regarding the South Pacific natives. Not only does Tommo emerge as a character with values and perceptions of the natives and the island surroundings that are different from those of his fellow crewmates, but he also, as a narrator, positions himself as separate from his assigned group belongingness of white sailor; he “speaks of the ship or the crew, and leaves his relationship to the action out of the picture…the narration becomes completely impersonal” (Oliviero 40). Thus, Tommo’s narrative voice exempts him from assuming responsibility for the actions of his crewmates and the implications thereof, actions that Melville utilizes to subvert the assumed superior white identity and inferior native identity. Contrary to popular beliefs regarding white, Christian missionaries and native islanders, there are numerous instances in which the Typee natives instead are those characters that are civilized and welcoming, while the white sailors act in savage and violent manners.

Disparities between the common perceptions of the two groups and the reality of their existence further emerges through the setting of Nukuheva, which serves to establish conflict between ingroup ideology (that of the white sailors aboard the Dolly) and Tommo’s personal perceptions, which deviate from those of his ingroup members, and to further reinforce the development of Tommo’s character and the overarching themes of the narrative. Previous accounts of Nukuheva and the Typee Valley have instilled in the Dolly crew the belief that the
island is filled with the dangers of cannibalism. Tommo, too, is aware of this belief, as evidenced when, in the opening pages of the text, he speaks of the Marquesas and instantly thinks of “cannibal banquets – tattooed chiefs – savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols – heathenish rites and human sacrifices” (*Typee* 5). However, Tommo is able to recognize and anticipate additional features of the island as well, including “groves of cocoa-nut – coral reefs – and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with bread-fruit trees – [and] carved canoes dancing on the flashing blue waters” (*Typee* 5), demonstrating that “he is a civilized man yearning to lose himself in an exotic, primitive Paradise, and he even imagines the ship itself being drawn toward the life-giving luxuriance of the shore” (Ruland 313). Tommo, upon arrival to and exploration of Nukuheva, does not see signs of heathenism, but rather implications of an Eden-like island:

> How shall I describe the scenery that met my eye, as I looked out from this verdant recess! The narrow valley, with its steep and close adjoining sides draperied with vines, and arched overhead with a fret-work of interlacing boughs, nearly hidden from view by masses of leafy verdure, seemed from where I stood like an immense arbor disclosing its vista to the eye, whilst as I advanced it insensibly widened into the loveliest vale eye ever beheld. (*Typee* 28)

Tommo makes numerous observations of this nature, suggesting early on and then consistently throughout the text that his character may not relate so closely to the identity of the white colonizer after all.

> The lush and bountiful plant life of the island, while beautiful, is also something that enables the central conflict of the narrative, as it is a mishap with the unfamiliar landscape that sends Tommo, with an injured leg, seeking refuge and aid in the valley. The entirety of Chapter 8 of the text is devoted to the recurring question, Typee or Happar? Tommo’s conflict presents a
subset of in and outgroups unique to Nukuheva: the Happar whom, though rumored to practice
cannibalism themselves, are known to be kind and receptive to the European missionary, unlike
the Typee natives, whom are notorious for their violence and savagery. The unexpected
worsening injury and difficulty navigating the foreign island landscape puts Tommo in contact
with the exact outgroup of people he has been conditioned to fear and thus begins to shift his
perceptions further from those of the white ingroup.

The perception of Nukuheva as possessing Eden-like qualities emphasizes and reinforces
the themes that Melville asserts throughout the narrative. The unblemished beauty of the
physical surroundings and, thus, the people who inhabit them is starkly contrasted by the actions
and resulting consequences brought about by the arrival of white crews. Tommo laments when
he shares a story of a previous white “invader” conquest of Nukuheva and the valley of the
Typee:

The invaders, on their march back to the sea, consoled themselves for their
repulse by setting fire to every house and temple in their route; and a long line of
smoking ruins defaced the once-smiling bosom of the valley and proclaimed to its
pagan inhabitants the spirit that reigned in the breasts of Christian soldiers. Who
can wonder at the deadly hatred of the Typees to all foreigners after such
unprovoked atrocities? (Typee 26)

Tommo’s statement clearly indicates that his beliefs are not congruent with those of his ascribed
ingroup, the white colonizing sailors of the Dolly. Tommo’s establishment of Nukuheva as
unmarred can be argued to be an intentional stylistic choice on the part of Melville to subvert the
falsely perceived superior and well-intentioned identity of the white colonizers; the destruction
of the island at the hand of the whites reveals them to be far more savage in nature than the
Typee natives, the presumed violent cannibals. Furthermore, statements such as this bolster the idea that the Typee natives may very well be the group that demonstrates superior morality and way of life, and may be the group with which Tommo actually better identifies. Just as Nukuheva is an effortless paradise, naturally beautiful and bountiful, its inhabitants create a lifestyle that embraces and mirrors that same simplicity and effortless beauty.

Tommo’s character embarks on a cyclical journey throughout Typee, one that brings him in and out of his ingroup, takes him in and out of the opposing outgroup, and places him at various points in between. As stated by Toni Oliviero in *Ambiguous Utopia, Savagery and Civilization* (1983):

> The pattern created by the plot of *Typee* is a closed circle which truly is a trap: Tommo escapes from the corrupt hierarchy of the ship and the endless sterility of the ocean, into the green promise of the island, from which he flies in terror of being devoured, back to a ship, which promises no change from the original. Likewise, at the level of diction there is a trap, a blurring of values, which mirrors and intensifies the ship-valley-ship pattern, arising from the continually shifting attributes of the characters. It becomes impossible to distinguish good from evil in this novel, and it becomes unnecessary to do so, since evil seems to accommodate itself so easily to whatever is around. (Oliviero 42)

Tommo’s wavering allegiances to the *Dolly*, to the Typee, and back to the *Dolly* at the conclusion of the text open avenues to explore social commentary that extend beyond the conventional travel narrative script. His initial abandonment of his ship and his crew frames *Typee* “as a kind of protest narrative against Anglo-European market economy” (Lawrence 62), while his violent escape from the Typee valley “aligns with prevailing antebellum notions of an
irreconcilable enmity between Anglo-Europeans and the aboriginal Other” (Lawrence 63). Thus, the narrative opens and concludes by highlighting the detrimental consequences of the nineteenth-century white expansionist movement, a subject with which Melville was very familiar.

At the time of publication, United States expansion had swelled to new proportions, resulting in the development of the notion of “Manifest Destiny.” In short, the United States sought to incorporate more and more land “without agency of [their] government, without responsibility of [their] people” (Sanborn 1). American entitlement was described by New York editor John O’Sullivan as an “instinctive longing for liberty and space…the expression of natural law” (Sanborn 1); as representatives of the Anglo-Saxon race, white Americans perceived expansion to be an efficient and inevitable form of progress, and a natural outgrowth of their race. While Herman Melville did not associate himself with the Manifest Destiny ideology, his own brother Gansevoort Melville embraced the movement; he believed in white expansionist authority over the savage and, just as the Typee missionaries did, supported the Manifest Destiny philosophy that sought to “[push] Christianity westward” (Rogin 21).

Observing firsthand the corrupt ideologies of his country – and his own family – Melville published Typee “as a spokesman for the aboriginal victims of Manifest Destiny” (Rogin 48) and a critic of American expansionism and capitalism. The text advocates for “savages to be civilized, but civilize them with benefits, and not with evils” (Typee 195), indicating that the present methodology behind American expansion and colonization is inherently flawed, and creates more vice than good. Melville brings these sentiments to life through Tommo’s character and narration, frequently noting the “contaminating contact [of] the white man” and commenting that “the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these polluting examples…are easily led
into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus remorselessly inflicted upon them by their European civilizers” (*Typee* 15). Beyond the level of human dignity, Melville also critiques an American system dominated by the blind pursuit of profit. Again employing Tommo as a vehicle for social critique, Melville comments extensively on what makes the Typee valley all the more attractive than American culture:

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 protested notes, no bills payable, no debts of honor in Typee; no unreasonable tailors and shoemakers, perversely bent on being paid; no duns of any description no assault and battery attorneys, to foment discord, backing their clients up to a quarrel, and then knocking their heads together; no poor relations, everlastingly occupying the spare bed-chamber, 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 debtor’s prisons; no proud and hard-hearted nabobs in Typee; or to sum all in one word – no Money! That “root of all evil” was not to be found in the valley. (*Typee* 126).

Tommo’s passionate words accomplish for Melville a critique of an exploitative American system that creates distinct groups of haves and have-nots. Through discussions of the simple yet pleasant lifestyle characteristic of the Typee valley, Melville creates social commentary and “asks his readers to look again at all the visions of disembodied mastery, whether imperial, evangelical, or scientific, and to see them in not the innocent triumph of spiritual ideals but the costly gratification of material interests” (Sanborn 3).
Melville’s fourth novel, *Redburn*, presents itself as a fictionalized autobiography recounting Melville’s first journey to sea as told through the narration and experiences of young protagonist Wellingborough Redburn. As with *Typee*, as the plot progresses, distinct groups begin to materialize in hierarchical fashion; there are the select few sailing businessmen who retain the majority of profits produced by voyages, followed by the sailing crews that perform the labor to produce the profit while receiving minimal compensation for their efforts, and the former sailors who, along with common citizens, compose the most disadvantaged division of the hierarchy. This social stratification, on its most basic level, can be understood as a group of haves and a group of have-nots – the wealthy and the impoverished. Like Tommo’s, Redburn’s journey follows him as he navigates between various ingroups and outgroups and struggles to find his place and identity at home, at sea on a ship that presents a microcosm of the greater social scheme, in Liverpool, and – again, like Tommo – back at home once more.

Unlike in *Typee*, where Melville accomplishes the construction of his in and outgroups of characters heavily through the use of language and dialogue, the distinct and disconnected social groups of *Redburn* emerge and are maintained mainly through the action, or lack thereof, of characters. Moreover, while one’s individual actions solidify one’s belonging to a particular ingroup, the actions of the outgroups with which one does not identify – particularly those groups that rank higher on the social scale – serve to solidify and further distinguish rigid group boundaries. This can be observed on numerous occasions throughout the entirety of the novel, and it is a trend that is applicable to each group that is presented in the text. The novel establishes early on that the action of bringing in money – the status of possessing personal wealth – is the driving force behind the American social system that Redburn belongs to. When Redburn’s father “became a bankrupt, and died,” the Redburn family was “removed from the
city” (Redburn 82), thus demonstrating that a failure to accumulate wealth correlates with subsequent failure to associate with society’s better-off class, and even to be worthy of occupying common space.

Shortly after the audience is introduced to Redburn’s character, the consequences of his family’s economic decline are evident; when he initially leaves home to embark on his travels, he finds that he “[has] not enough money to pay for [his] fare” and begins to “[feel] that desperation and recklessness of poverty which only a pauper knows” (Redburn 54), and that is the unfortunate reality of his situation. Though he is young and his naiveté and lack of worldly experience are incredibly apparent, Redburn has enough awareness to recognize that his hopes for improved circumstances do not lie with anyone that he has or will encounter; it is an “every man for himself” society, and Redburn knows that, “for what cast-away will not promise to take care of himself, when he sees that unless he himself does, no one else will” (Redburn 53). While Redburn does in fact find minimal success working his way upward through the social rankings of the Highlander vessel – rankings that, replacing monetary power with the powers of skill and productivity – mimic those of mainland American society. As a result, he achieves “a little more consideration” (Redburn 181) from his seafaring superiors, even though he continues to face inhibition of further upward mobility from those same superiors. At the conclusion of Redburn’s travels, he is denied compensation from Captain Riga; the officer instead claims that Redburn owes him payments that accrued throughout the voyage, thus embodying the exploitative economic-driven social structure that allows for little to no advancement of those placed in financially inferior positions.

As in Typee, the deliberate formation of setting also contributes to the creation and maintenance of social groups in Redburn. The primary settings seen throughout the novel –
urban America, the *Highlander*, and Liverpool – are intimately connected in that each is an extension of the others. A common theme that emerges from Redburn’s experience with each setting – one that seemingly extends to other characters and groups as well – is that of loneliness and isolation. Redburn fails to find a meaningful sense of belonging and identity in America in the wake of his family’s downfall, and the social isolation that occurs as a result prompts him to seek a place on the *Highlander*; he has high hopes of escaping his present bleak reality in favor of experiencing the wonder and awe of travel that his father once spoke of. However, life aboard the *Highlander* turns out to be just as isolating, if not more so, for Redburn as his naiveté and lack of seafaring experience are exploited, and his beliefs, character, and family name and upbringing are challenged and ridiculed by his shipmates. The ship quickly becomes a microcosm of the American society that Redburn seeks to leave behind; there is a clear hierarchy of men, one in which rank is awarded based on an apparent inversion of work and economics – those such as Captain Riga who perform minimal tasks retain the most profit and thus, the most respected rank, while sailors, especially young ones such as Redburn, perform laborious tasks in exchange for little reward or respect. The ship, like urban America, is host to inhabitants from all walks of life. The same physical setting can transform completely from one voyage to the next; the ship that carries “gay parties of ladies and gentlemen, as tourists, to Liverpool or London” (*Redburn* 164-165) is the same structure in which emigrants are “stowed away like bales of cotton, and packed like slaves in a slave-ship” (*Redburn* 323). One’s experience aboard the *Highlander* – just as one’s experience in nineteenth century America – is determined by the status and group identity that individuals carry with them; passengers may be in the middle of the ocean, but the boundaries of social identification are shown to be limitless, as not much changes from land to sea.
The city of Liverpool, the intended destination of Redburn and the *Highlander* voyage, is a setting in which Melville’s critique of rigid social stratification as a result of economics continues. Charles Waugh says:

> The city, for Melville, becomes a symbol of everything wrong about the process of globalization, since the interconnectedness of life has moved well beyond individuals’ abilities to care about anything but their own survival. People are thrust together, forced into connections of previously distinct arenas of social interaction, all for the uncertain prospect of finding work that will define the individual at the same time that it perpetuates the global capitalist machine.

(Waugh 222)

Liverpool is the ultimate source of isolation: for sailors, for native city-dwellers, and for Redburn. On European soil, not only is Redburn physically separated from his family, but he also becomes emotionally distanced as he slowly comes to terms with his naiveté and disillusionment with global travel. Simply stated, Redburn does not fit in to the fabric of Liverpool society; upon his arrival, he has yet to connect with his shipmates, and he is a stranger in a foreign land that only becomes increasingly stranger as his expectations fail to be met. Redburn fails to find belonging in any sort of group or social circle; while he develops some semblance of an acquaintance with Harry Bolton during his time in Liverpool, Harry too is very much an outgroup character that fails to find meaningful belonging where society expects he should. This alliance of Redburn and Harry reinforces the theme of isolation and the notion that barriers stand in the way of achieving meaningful belonging, perpetuating social reclusiveness in societies across the globe. Thus, Redburn’s position as an individual and his brief coexistence
with Harry both reveal that social isolation is a normative result of social hierarchy in a
capitalistic culture.

Liverpool is also an especially poignant setting when it is considered as a device
employed by Melville to reinforce themes such as the loss of innocence and the dangers of a
rigid global capitalistic economy. It is Liverpool and Redburn’s time spent there that reveal the
harshest social realities and moments of despair and disillusionment. While there are few
specific instances cited as evidence of the bleakness of society – the extended episode of the
starving mother and children in Chapter 37 is the most raw and telling example as such –
Redburn informs the audience shortly thereafter that his previous observation is by no means
unique or unexpected when he details the scenes that are common near the ship docks:

Old women, rather mummies, drying up with slow starving and age; young girls,
incurably sick, who ought to have been in the hospital; sturdy men, with the
gallows in their eyes, and a whining lie in their mouths; young boys, hollow-eyed
and decrepit; and puny mothers, holding up puny babies in the glare of the sun,
formed the main features of the scene. (Redburn 259)

It is the setting of Liverpool that also enables some depth in Redburn’s character to emerge.
Prior to his arrival, Redburn is arguably not much more than a young American sailor thrust
from the comfort of familiarity, despite the familiar not always being all that enjoyable. Yet in
Liverpool, a thoughtful, observant Redburn begins to share his reflections, observations that
divert from those that would be expected from a young American seafarer and traveler. He
acknowledges “that the case of sailors, as a class, is not a very promising one” (Redburn 203),
yet he also says “we must not altogether despair for the sailor; nor need those who toil for his
good be at bottom disheartened” (Redburn 205); Redburn refuses to surrender all hope for
change or redemption. Similarly, Redburn’s thoughts reveal that he is rather discontented with the realities of poverty and suffering he encounters in Liverpool; though he seems to be no stranger to socioeconomic disadvantage, Redburn is simply not accustomed to being in the presence of such immense despair. And, contrary to the seemingly popular beliefs held by his assumed ingroup of common sailors at the time, Redburn holds on to hope, however blind or unrealistic, that the current social reality will change. He manifests his struggles to comprehend and his inability to impact positive change for the impoverished citizens of Liverpool through prayer, asking “that some angel might descend, and turn the waters of the docks into an elixir, that would heal all their woes, and make them, man and woman, healthy and whole as their ancestors, Adam and Eve, in the garden” (Redburn 261). It is this setting, and Redburn’s thoughts and actions therein, that reminds the audience that “the global trade that has transformed Liverpool and its docks and motivates all these people of every nationality has not provided the same benefits to everyone, but is also evidence that Melville knew and cared about the fates of people such as these, and that he wanted others to know and care about them as well” (Waugh 217).

There is little debate that Redburn is a semi-fictionalized account of Melville’s first experience at sea, but the ways in which Melville is present throughout the text and in Redburn’s character and the commentary and critique that is presented, is sometimes overlooked. In a letter to his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, regarding the works Redburn and White Jacket (1850), Melville writes “I have not repressed myself very much – so far as they are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel” (West 165). Thus, it can be inferred from the text “that Melville views capitalism as an alienating force, a hindrance to the American Dream, and a cause of
social injustice throughout the Western world” (West 165) through the commentary and observations of Redburn, who in many ways embodies Melville himself.

In *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, Rogin notes the numerous parallels between Redburn and a young Melville. The glass ship displayed in the Redburn family’s home, a possession of Redburn’s late father and the object of his utmost fantasy and admiration, was a feature in Melville’s own family parlor (Rogin 64). The familial background of the fictional Redburn and the real Melville is incredibly similar; both lost their fathers at a young age, and subsequently the elder brothers of both families inherited family responsibility and authority and found the younger boys (Redburn and Herman) positions aboard sea voyages (Rogin 65). This elder Melville brother Gansevoort occupies an important space within the narrative of *Redburn*. The character of Jackson, whom Redburn feels both resentment and pity for, is linked historically and politically to General Jackson of New Orleans, artistically to Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, and, not coincidentally, to Gansevoort (Rogin 66). The ideology and beliefs of Herman’s brother, a firm proponent of Manifest Destiny, display themselves in the American identity of capitalism throughout the text, an identity and the consequences thereof which Redburn opposes, as made clear by his observations of “working sailors above deck, diseased, starving emigrants below, and beggars ashore” (Rogin 70), again, not coincidentally, the same observations Melville made on his own sea voyages.

With these insights in mind, it can be inferred that the reactions and observations of Redburn likely parallel in some way those of Melville himself. Therefore, the moments in which Redburn expresses criticism and despair over the state of societies stratified and broken by a global capitalistic market can be read as moments where Melville himself expresses disdain and critique. West says:
Melville’s images of starving street people, hopeless wanderers, and beggars recovering drowned bodies from the docks are stark criticisms of Western society, a society that claims a highly civilized nature while taking advantage of the disadvantaged for economic gain. Worse, Melville sees in Liverpool a fate possible in American cities because of the injustices of rampant and unregulated capitalism…as Redburn grows and experiences the world, he becomes more and more aware of not only his own financial misfortunes, but also the poverty and misery that can be found throughout the civilized world…The correlation between the United States and Liverpool is evident, as both are relatively new territories. In America, the shift is beginning from the pastoral, agricultural life of Redburn’s hometown to the urban life of capitalist-controlled mass production. This shift causes Melville to fear that as Americans move to cities, new cities like Liverpool will emerge in America, cities controlled by the owners of capital. (West 177-178)

Evidence for Melville’s fear is in Redburn’s return to America at the conclusion of the novel. Like Tommo, Redburn undergoes a transformative cyclical journey, a departure from home to a foreign and unknown place and a return home once again, with a different understanding of the word. Redburn brings to his homecoming the sobering wisdom of his experience and an awareness of the horror of the consequences of capitalism, yet like Tommo’s violent return to the Dolly, there seems to be little hope or promise for change or improved circumstances. Melville’s concerns take a fictional embodiment in the circumstances in which Redburn is left, and the audience, particularly the contemporary readership of Melville’s time, is left to seriously ponder the state of the social reality in which they live.
In conclusion, in texts *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* and *Redburn*, Melville offers through his protagonists and their actions social critique and commentary that persists from initial nineteenth-century publication into contemporary times. The failure of Tommo and Redburn to adhere to their presumed social identities and ingroups as established by Social Identity Theory and their identification with stigmatized outgroups throughout their respective journeys challenges readers to examine the social structure – Manifest Destiny-driven, capitalistic, or otherwise – in which they live and to identify points of weakness and areas for redress and improvement. The cyclical return of the protagonists to their original starting points serves as a reminder that without proper attention and constructive criticism and reflection, there is little hope for achieving enduring social transformation; the individual characters are vehicles employed to reach a wider audience capable of impacting change. In his integration of autobiographical elements into his fictional works, Melville makes his vision for and intention of his texts transparent to the readership. Melville fictionalizes his own experiences of the society in which he lives in order to call for change; the worlds he presents to his readers contain very real elements, and the challenge is for readers to acknowledge these points of identification and to act upon them in meaningful and productive ways.
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