A Comparison of the Social Criticism in Melville's Typee and Thoreau's Walden

Mary Riedy

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A COMPARISON OF THE SOCIAL CRITICISM IN MELVILLE'S TYPEE
AND THOREAU'S WALDEN

BY
MARY RIEDY

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
State University

1967
A COMPARISON OF THE SOCIAL CRITICISM IN MELVILLE'S *TYPEE*
AND THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree, but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser

Thesis Adviser

Head, English Department
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau are two of the most original American authors who appeared during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the writings of both Melville and Thoreau have been examined extensively in scholarship, little has been done in the way of attempting a comparison of their work. In fact, Melville and Thoreau are usually regarded as being basically dissimilar, since Thoreau was an avowed member of the Transcendentalist movement, which Melville openly opposed.¹

There are, indeed, many dissimilarities between the two writers. Thoreau belonged to the Concord group of authors, while Melville did not. Melville was primarily a novelist while Thoreau's prose works were essays. In addition, the theme of Melville's major works concerned the problem of the existence of evil in the universe; Thoreau, as a Transcendentalist, frequently dealt with the underlying relationship between man and nature. Thoreau was more optimistic than was Melville; some of the latter's works are darkly pessimistic.

Despite the evident differences between Melville and Thoreau, there are certain similarities which lend validity to an attempted comparison of their works. Melville and Thoreau were contemporaries, neither man was "successful" in the usual sense of the word, and they

were both critical of American society of the time. It is with regard to social criticism that at least one significant comparison can be drawn between the two men.

Melville's book Typee and Thoreau's essay Walden are strikingly similar in their expression of social criticism. In these two works, both of which were written in the 1840's, the authors are openly critical of social conditions in America during the period from 1830 to 1850. The purpose of this paper is to compare the social criticism in Typee and Walden by pointing out specifically those characteristics of American civilization which Melville and Thoreau agreed were open to criticism.

There are obvious limitations to a comparison between Typee and Walden. One such limitation is that Typee was Melville's first significant literary attempt, while Thoreau had written a book and various essays and articles before he wrote Walden, which is regarded as his masterpiece. Another limitation concerns the experiences which produced Typee and Walden; although both experiences represent "withdrawals" from American society, it must be remembered that Melville's was unplanned, involuntary, and only a month long in contrast with Thoreau's withdrawal, which was planned, deliberate, and lasted two years. The social criticism made in the two works differs too, in that Melville made his criticism by comparing one society with another; Thoreau made his as an individual removed from but in some contact with the society he was criticizing.

These limitations do not, however, preclude the possibility of
drawing comparisons between *Typee* and *Walden* which throw meaningful light upon the particular period in American life. Many critics have long recognized the fact that both *Typee* and *Walden* are expressions of the authors' social criticism. For example, about *Typee*, Clifton Fadiman has said that "it is an eloquent if simple presentation of the case against the hypocrisies and coercions of civilization . . . "\(^1\) Russell Blankenship has commented that *Typee* presented specific indictments of civilization backed up with evidence from native life.\(^2\) Of *Walden*, Merle Curti commented, "*Walden Pond* was Thoreau's antidote to railways and cities,"\(^3\) and Vernon Parrington remarked about Thoreau's attitude in *Walden* that "he did not understand why Americans should boast of a system that provided vulgar leisure for the master at the cost of serfdom for the workers."\(^4\)

That there is a basis for comparison between *Typee* and *Walden* is indicated in a comment made by critic and biographer Lewis Mumford: "*Typee* is Melville's *Walden*, without the philosophic reflection and without the premeditated purpose to test the benefits of a more


primitive life: Walden is Thoreau's Typee without the physical derring-do and adventure.”¹

The social criticism found in Typee and Walden concerns several aspects of society each of which resulted from the beginnings of industrialization in the United States. There are two major areas of criticism and five minor areas which figure in both Typee and Walden and which therefore lend themselves to comparisons between the two works. Chapter 4 will consider the two major criticisms and Chapter 5 will contain a discussion of the minor points of criticism. However, before the social criticisms are listed and comparisons drawn, it is first necessary to examine the society of the 1830's and 1840's, with special attention being paid to factors related to the industrial character of the nation during those years, and to discover the motivation for Melville's and Thoreau's social criticism. Chapter 2 will contain a historical summary of the 1830's and 1840's, and Chapter 3 will recount the personal backgrounds of Melville and Thoreau, showing some reasons for the two men's critical attitudes.

Pertinent Literature

Comparisons between Typee and Walden as social criticism are seemingly non-existent except for the previously quoted comment by Lewis Mumford. With regard to Typee individually, little work of any

sort has been done, since Typee is usually dismissed as an adventure story and the least of Melville's books. It is usually given only passing mention by most Melville critics, who devote their efforts to analyzing Melville's later works, especially Moby Dick. Milton Stern does, however, devote a chapter in The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville to analyzing the society Melville found in the Typee valley and to showing the contrast between that society and the one extant in the United States. Also, Typee is considered in doctoral dissertations such as A Study of Melville's Social Criticism as Reflected in his Prose Writings by Alice L. Godard (Illinois, 1946) and Herman Melville: Humanitarian and Critic of Politics by Howard K. Thurman (Iowa, 1950), which deal with Melville as a social critic.

The most valuable sources of information on the social criticism in Typee are those which give the general intellectual background of the period, such as Blankenship's American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, Gabriel's The Course of American Democratic Thought, Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought, and Curti's The Growth of American Thought. Some information may also be found in books giving general literary background, such as Cowie's The Rise of the American Novel, and in introductions such as James Baird's in the section on Melville in American Literary Masters, Vol. I. Helpful information is often included in the introductions to various editions of Typee, such as the previously cited introduction by Fadiman.

Other sources which mention Typee as social criticism include general works like Mumford's Herman Melville and Chase's Herman
Melville. Incidental material may also be found in C. L. R. James' 
Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways, a discussion of Melville's sympathy 
with the lower classes, and in Melville: A Collection of Critical 
Essays, edited by Chase, which includes an essay on Typee and Omoo.

There has been a large amount of scholarship done concerning 
Walden, but very little of that scholarship considers Walden as social 
批评; instead, the essay is usually regarded as essentially a 
treatise on nature, as a transcendental exploration of the individual 
soul, or as an indication of Thoreau's opinions on economic affairs. 
For example, of the articles which appear in Sherman Paul's Thoreau: 
A Collection of Critical Essays, none treats Walden as social criticism. 
Approaches to Walden, another collection edited by Lauriat Lane, Jr., 
also includes numerous articles, none of which consider Walden as so­
cial criticism.

However, some Thoreau critics, such as Henry Seidel Canby in 
Classic Americans and Joseph Wood Krutch in Henry David Thoreau, ex­
amine the social criticism in Walden. Some information may also be 
found in Walter Harding's A Thoreau Handbook, in A Thoreau Profile by 
Meltzer and Harding, and in Stoller's After Walden.

As is also true of Typee, the most valuable sources concerning 
Walden as social criticism are those rather general works which discuss 
social criticism in the background of the period. Such works include 
Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought, Gabriel's The Course of 
CHAPTER 2

THE AMERICA OF THE 1830'S AND 1840'S

The 1830's and 1840's were the opening years of industrialization in the United States. Although the machine age had actually begun in the late eighteenth century, it did not produce significant effects in the United States until around 1830 when new machinery and new processes stimulated industry, especially the textile and iron industries. The 1830's and 1840's were years of significant development in textile factories. By 1830, the smaller streams in New England were being used nearly to full capacity to provide water power for such mills as the textile mills at Paterson, New Jersey. The mills at Lowell, Massachusetts, were also developing during the 1830's, and by 1840 there were nine large mills in operation, in addition to the largest machine-shop in the United States. The mills at Paterson and Lowell were representative of similar although smaller mills which were being developed throughout New England. During the same period, the iron industry in the United States entered a stage of change and development caused by the introduction between 1830 and 1850 of such advances as mineral fuel and hot blast processes.

2Ibid., p. 404.
3Ibid., p. 405.
4Ibid., p. 412.
By 1830, then, the factory system had been introduced and manufacturing in general was in the process of being transferred from the home to the factory.\textsuperscript{1} According to Norman Ware, "by 1840, machinery had taken almost entire possession of the manufacture of cloth and was making rapid advances in the iron industry."\textsuperscript{2}

There were other evidences of a new era in American industry, signified by the rash of inventions which appeared during the 1830's and 1840's and by the improvements in transportation and communication. Between 1830 and 1850, the revolver, the reaper, the steel plow, vulcanized rubber, the coal stove, the sewing machine, the flat-iron, and friction matches were all invented and introduced to the American public.\textsuperscript{3} The 1840's saw the initial stages of the development of a telegraph system and a railroad and canal system in the United States. Improved communications and transportation made it possible for more people to be aware of and to have access to the new products which the industrialization process made available.

The United States was still largely agrarian in character when the nineteenth century opened, but during the 1830's and 1840's, a gradual trend toward an industrial character began. One indication of the process was the growth in the city population. The mills and

\textsuperscript{1}Clark, p. 403.

\textsuperscript{2}Norman Ware, \textit{The Industrial Worker 1840-1860} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), p. 1.

factories, as they increased in size and number, drew more people to the cities; an added increase came from the influx of laboring class immigrants to America from such European nations as Ireland and Germany. The population of New York, for example, rose from 30,000 in the 1780's to nearly half a million by the middle of the nineteenth century.\(^1\) Between 1830 and 1840, the nation's urban population as a whole went up 68% while the rural population during the same years increased only 30%; during the 1840's, the urban increase was 99% while the rural increase remained at 30%.\(^2\)

The industrial development during the 1830's and 1840's resulted in the creation of new wealth in the United States. In New England, the old patrician social class, people who had made their fortunes in shipping and trade, was first joined and then replaced by a new class whose fortunes were made in railroads, iron mills, and factories which produced textiles, hardware, pottery, or shoes.\(^3\)

The creation of the new wealth had two effects: first, it increased the buying power of a significant segment of the population, including the factory owners and workers, and second, it altered the social and cultural traditions of the nation, especially of New England.

The new class of wealthy who owned the factories and mills were not of

\(\begin{align*}
2&\text{Henry Gannett, }\textit{The Building of a Nation} \textit{(New York: The Henry T. Thomas Co., 1895), p. 77.} \\
3&\text{Beard, p. 726.}
\end{align*}\)
the old staid New England traditions, and they were not concerned with
the same type of culture revered by the established wealthy. The new
classes, both the factory owners and workers, were, however, interested
in the new cultural developments such as magazines and newspapers,
which "permitted the masses to break in upon the intellectual monopoly
of the upper classes. . . ."  

Industrialization brought about a new era in economic organization as well as in the social structure. The machine age led to the
establishment of corporations which by 1830 were already dominant in
banking and road building. During the 1830's and 1840's, corporations
increased in number and in significance as testified to by the enactment of incorporation laws in the late 1840's by several states. In
addition, the period saw the creation of the embryonic labor movement
among the industrial proletariat, a movement which began in the 1820's
with local organizations and became nation wide with the founding of
the National Trades' Union in 1834. The labor movement increased the
economic importance of the working class and tended to threaten the
power of the moneyed class.

1Beard, p. 727.
2Ibid.
3Carl Russell Fish, The Rise of the Common Man (New York: The
4Fish, pp. 57-58.
5Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little,
6Ibid.
In addition to the effects of industrialization, there are various other aspects of American social history of the 1830's and 1840's which should be discussed briefly because of their relevance to the social criticism made by Melville and Thoreau. One important aspect of society was the rise of the common man, signified by the election, in 1828, of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States. Jackson typified the non-propertied, non-educated, and non-cultured individual usually referred to as the common man, and his election was representative of the political role the common man was beginning to play in America.¹

Another significant aspect of American society of the 1830's and 1840's was the idea of "manifest destiny."² The 1840's witnessed the culmination of the national expansion westward; Texas was annexed in 1845, the Mexican War began in 1846, the Oregon boundary was adjusted in 1846, and the California gold rush occurred in 1848. The manifest destiny idea spilled over into other areas of the world, too, particularly with regard to missionary activity in the South Seas.³ American influence in the South Seas started in 1820 when a mission was sent to Hawaii. The years from 1837 to 1843 were a period of great missionary activity; during that time, 27,000 conversions were made in Hawaii

¹Beard, p. 553, and Fish, p. 21.
²Fish, p. 291.
³Ibid., p. 192.
Closely related to the manifest destiny idea was the prevailing temper of the 1830's and 1840's. The rising wages and profits in the factory system and in the nation were indicative of the fact that the 1830's and 1840's as a whole were primarily years of national prosperity, with the exception of 1837, the year of the nation wide panic. As a result of the economic atmosphere and of the changes and improvements that were introduced in American society, the period was an optimistic and exuberant one in American history.  

Another significant development was that public institutions began to play a greater part in American life during the 1830's and 1840's. American churches and schools increased both in number and in significance during the period. By 1850, for instance, there were 38,183 churches whose total property was valued at $87,983,028; between 1830 and 1850 eighty colleges were founded in the United States.

There were other forms of public organization also, such as political caucuses, suffrage conventions, temperance movements, and socialist groups. The latter serve as an example of the contemporary trend for people to join together in organized fashion (as had the laboring class) to achieve a particular goal. Between 1840 and 1850, over forty

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2Beard, p. 728.

3Fish, p. 325.

4Ibid., pp. 325, 214.
socialist projects were attempted, including Brook Farm in 1841.¹

It is apparent from the preceding historical resumé of the 1830's and 1840's that the period was both a vital and a crucial one in the course of American history. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the period was the consistent change which was turning the "America of stagecoaches, handlooms, and seaboard villages" of the eighteenth century into the "America of cotton mills, blast furnaces, and a continental empire" that existed in the late nineteenth century.²

The 1830's and 1840's were a transition period in which factors such as "the revolution in technology, the reconstruction of the social order under the impact of machine industry . . . the economic independence brought to the nation by increased wealth, the ferment of political equality . . ."³ combined to break the relative political and social calm of the agricultural era.

Since the nation itself was in a condition of change and development, that condition was reflected in intellectual ferment among American critics and thinkers. In literature, the period was one of emerging individuality which created a distinctively American literature. Emerson represented the literary trend when he declared in his Phi Beta Kappa Address in 1837 that "we will walk on our own feet, we will work with our own hands, we will speak our own minds."⁴

¹Fish, p. 189.
²Beard, p. 762.
³Ibid., p. 761.
One of the ways in which the American individuality was expressed was through objections to contemporary developments such as those discussed earlier in this chapter. While there were many Americans who firmly believed in and supported the changes in society during the 1830's and 1840's, there were also those who regarded the changes as questionable in their ultimate value to man. Melville and Thoreau were among the latter.

The remainder of this paper will show Melville's and Thoreau's position with regard to American society of the 1830's and 1840's as they knew it in their own lives and as they represented it in *Typee* and *Walden*. It will be shown that their social criticism concerned trends in America which were related to the industrialization process and the other aspects of the society described in this chapter. An understanding of their social criticism should increase the reader's understanding of their work as a whole as well as deepening his understanding of this period in American history.
CHAPTER 3

MELVILLE AND THOREAU: FAILURES IN THE NEW SOCIETY

This chapter will present biographical and background information on both Melville and Thoreau. The information will show that neither Melville nor Thoreau was a "success" in contemporary America, that both had reason to object to American society, and that their individual experiences led to their respective works, Typee and Walden. The chapter will also summarize each work briefly.

Herman Melville and Typee

In 1841, Herman Melville sailed as a crew member of the whaling vessel Acushnet. He spent nearly one and one half years on the vessel, whose route took her along the coast of South America, around the Horn, and then to whaling grounds in the South Seas. Melville was twenty-two at the time. His father had once been a prominent New York businessman and his mother was a member of the patrician Gansevoort family of Albany, but the family's financial and social position had by 1841 reached a low point. The family situation, combined with Herman's previous personal experiences, prompted him to sign aboard the Acushnet.

Although Melville was born into an aristocratic and well-to-do

2Ibid., p. 38.
family, events soon reduced the family to lesser circumstances. When Herman Melville was born in New York in 1819, his father, Allan Melville, was the prosperous owner of an importing business. The year of Herman's birth, however, was one of the last prosperous years the family was to know. Financial setbacks began in the mid-1820's and by the time Herman's father died in 1832, the family was in serious financial trouble. From then on, the Melville family was subjected to a series of continuing financial crises, culminating in the failure of Gansevoort Melville's fur store. Gansevoort, Herman's brother, had undertaken to support the family after his father's death, and for a time he was at least adequately successful. But in the nation wide financial panic of 1837, Gansevoort's business failed.¹

The family's financial troubles could not fail to affect Herman Melville himself. When his father died, Herman was withdrawn from the Albany Academy to become a clerk in his uncle's bank. Subsequently, he went through a variety of positions, ranging from working as a hand on his uncle's farm to clerking in his brother's store. Intermittently he returned to school, eventually receiving enough education to enable him to accept a teaching assignment when he was no more than eighteen years old.²

In school Melville had excelled in composition and literature, but as a clerk and as a teacher in a small rural school he was forced

¹Arvin; p. 24.
²Howard, p. 10.
to make frequent use of mathematics, a subject which he disliked. In addition, because some of the pupils took advantage of his youth and his small stature, it is conjectured that Melville was not particularly happy or successful as a teacher.¹

Melville was not happy doing any of the things he tried, and his sense of personal dissatisfaction must have been heightened by the fact that his family did not fit into American society of the late 1820's and the 1830's. The Melvilles never shared any of the general prosperity enjoyed by the nation from 1827 to 1837. Financial failure affected both of Herman's parents, his father to the extent that a member of the family said that he was deranged at the time of his death.² Mrs. Melville's mental health was severely strained both at the time of her husband's death and during the ensuing struggle to provide for her eight children and settle her husband's financial obligations. The family's move in 1838 from Albany to Lansingburgh was undertaken at least partly to escape the demands of creditors. The Melvilles were reduced to being "poor relations" who had to look to other members of the family for assistance.³

In addition, the Melvilles were part of the patrician social class that was rapidly giving way to a less genteel but more materially successful group which was unconcerned with its predecessors'

¹Howard, p. 11.
²Ibid., p. 7.
³Arvin, p. 24.
pretensions to culture and correctness. The Melville family felt the impact of the emergence of the new class when in 1829 Herman's paternal grandfather was removed from his post (to which he had been assigned by George Washington) as naval officer of the port of Boston by President Andrew Jackson, a champion of the common man.

At twenty-two Melville found himself unemployed, a member of an unsuccessful and troubled family, and faced with making his own way. Several of his relatives had gone to sea before him, his uncle and two cousins among them, so that it is not odd that he should have chosen sailing as the best alternative open to him. Melville may also have been influenced by Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, published in 1840, since Melville later wrote to Dana that he had read the book in the fall of 1840. At any rate, late in 1840 he signed for a voyage aboard the Acushnet. The ship sailed in January, 1841.

All his life, Melville regarded his various experiences at sea as invaluable, maintaining that they had been his Harvard and his Yale.

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1Mumford, p. 15.
2Arvin, p. 10.
3Dana's book was so immensely popular that nearly everyone who was of a literary bent read it (Arthur Stedman, "Introduction to the Edition of 1892," *Typee* [Boston: The St. Bostolph Society, 1892], p. xxxi).
5Stedman, p. xviii.
His voyages formed the basis of several of his books, including *Moby Dick*, his greatest work. The voyage aboard the *Acushnet* and the resultant adventures in the South Seas gave rise to the publication of *Typee*.

The *Acushnet* reached the Marquesas in the South Seas in June, 1842. On July 9, Melville and a friend, Toby Greene, dissatisfied with the conditions aboard, deserted the *Acushnet* as it lay at anchor in Nukuheva. Following the desertion, Melville spent a month as a captive of the Typees, who were reputed to be the fiercest native tribe on the island of Nukuheva. He was eventually rescued (his friend having escaped earlier) by the captain of another whaling ship, whose crew Melville then joined. After subsequent voyages aboard various ships, Melville returned to the United States in 1844.

Melville's adventures among the natives during the days he spent in the valley as their captive were the basis of *Typee*, his first book, written after his return to the United States. It was published in 1846. *Typee* is an account of the society, the customs, and the habits of the Typees, who, according to Melville, had not been subjected to any previous contact with civilized men. The events in the book occupy a time of about four months, a longer time than the actual month Melville spent on the island.

Melville described the way the natives treated him while they

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1Howard, p. 51.
2Leyda, p. 138.
3Spiller, p. 443.
held him captive, how the natives spent their time, and how they reacted to neighboring tribes and to white men. In addition to the account of the Typees themselves, Melville included references to conditions he observed among other native tribes in the course of his South Sea travels, and he mentioned various events which happened when the natives of the islands came under the influence of white men.

Melville's account of the Typees' lives and of their society is enthusiastic. His enthusiasm for the primitive society he found in Typee contrasts sharply with the criticisms he makes of the society existing concurrently in civilized parts of the world. Melville's comments, which reveal that he did not accept and approve all those qualities which characterized the society of the contemporary civilized world, are an expression of his social criticism.

That Melville should be critical of contemporary American society is, in the light of his personal experiences and hardships, somewhat less than startling. The contrast between life in the United States, where Melville and his family had known poverty and hardship, and life in the Typee valley, where the material things a man needed were either unimportant or readily available, could hardly have failed to impress him. Although it cannot be argued that he wrote *Typee* solely to express social criticism, nevertheless Melville's praise of the society he found in Typee cannot be taken as anything other than at least an implied criticism of the contrasting society in America.¹

¹*Typee* was reportedly written at the instigation of Melville's
The social criticisms made in *Typee* were largely ignored by the reading public of the nineteenth century, who generally regarded the book as an idyllic description of a barbarous but quaint tribe of South Sea islanders. In fact, those sections of the book which criticized the missionaries, the chief agents of the spread of civilization among the natives, were until 1892 omitted from the editions of *Typee* published in the United States, although they were published in England, where they aroused comment concerning Melville's alleged bitterness.\(^1\) The social criticisms made in *Omoo*, a sequel to *Typee*, included especially caustic comments about missionaries. Those comments aroused a storm of protest when the book was published in 1847.\(^2\) In subsequent years, Melville's works continued to be critical of certain social phenomena (such as flogging, the factory system, and slavery) and to praise simple, semi-barbarous people at the expense of their civilized counterparts. Melville failed to achieve literary or financial success during his lifetime, and the fact that his sense of failure virtually silenced him for twenty years of his life is well known.

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1. Stedman, p. xxxi.
2. Ibid.
Melville's early books contained more social criticism than did his later works, which focused on the forces of good and evil operating on and within man. Social criticism may never have been the single motivating force behind Melville's work, but the criticisms he made are significant nonetheless. Melville is seldom credited with having been as concerned with contemporary political and social conditions as were other authors of the period; he is often omitted entirely from the list of those who were aware of and reacted to materialism, industrialization, and other developments characteristic of the 1830's and 1840's. However, Melville's comments in Typee reveal that he was conscious of inadequacies in American life and that he objected to many of its aspects. These aspects will be discussed specifically in Chapters 4 and 5 of this paper.

Thoreau and Walden

Just as Typee was molded by Melville's family situation and his personal experiences, so Walden was a product of Thoreau's experiences in contemporary society and at Walden Pond. By 1841, the year Melville sailed on the Acushnet, Henry David Thoreau had decided that he wanted to conduct an experiment in living alone somewhere away from the stress of ordinary life in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau had been interested in the experimental cooperative society Brook Farm, which began operating in 1841, and when his interest in that failed, he determined to conduct a sort of personal Brook Farm of his own.¹ For his experiment,

he "withdrew" to a cabin in the woods near Walden Pond outside the town of Concord. Thoreau moved to the cabin on July 4, 1845, lived there for two years and two months, and returned to Concord on September 6, 1847.¹

Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, where he lived for most of his life. Although the Thoreaus were not aristocrats, theirs was a name respected in Concord. The whole family was vitally interested in events of the day, and the atmosphere of the home was an intellectual one. Henry's brother was an amateur naturalist, one of his sisters is described as having been an intellectual, and his other sister was an amateur painter.² Henry, who was regarded as the genius of the family, attended the Concord Academy, a private school.

Although the Thoreau's financial situation is usually described in no more enthusiastic terms than "genteel poverty,"³ Henry, partially supported by a scholarship, entered Harvard in 1833. John Thoreau, Henry's father, was at that time operating a home-based business in which he manufactured graphite for lead pencils, and despite the fact that the business was by that time more successful than it had ever been, Mrs. Thoreau had to keep boarders. When the invention of electrotypers increased the demand for graphite, the family business became more valuable, and by the time Henry became its nominal head, it was a

¹Krutch, pp. 74, 86.
²Ibid., p. 18.
³Ibid., p. 16.
flourishing enterprise.¹

Thoreau's college career was unspectacular, and there is little to indicate that he had at that time any more than begun to develop the ideas that made him the individual he later became.² After his graduation from Harvard in 1837, he turned to teaching for a year. The next year, after trips to Maine and Kentucky, he returned to Concord and with his brother John took over the Concord Academy, which he had earlier attended. At the age of twenty, Thoreau began to keep his Journal, and before long he began contributing to the Transcendentalist publication The Dial. As early as 1838, he delivered lectures at the Lyceum.³

Thoreau had already started to develop his own ideas by the time he began frequenting the Concord group, and after he became a regular member of the circle that gathered for conversations in Emerson's home, he was well on his way to becoming the Thoreau whose ideas later inspired Mahatma Gandhi.⁴ In 1841, when Henry's brother died, the Concord Academy closed and Henry made no effort to have it re-opened. He was then free to accept Emerson's invitation to live with him as a handy man and a family member, which he did for two years.

Those two years brought him into even closer contact with the members of the Transcendentalist circle. After he left the Emerson household (at the suggestion of Emerson, who felt that Thoreau was too

¹Krutch, p. 52.
²Ibid., p. 21.
³Ibid., p. 41.
⁴Ibid., p. 42.
contented as a handy man), Thoreau went to live with Emerson's lawyer brother on Staten Island, at least partly to find possible contacts for the sale of his literary productions.\(^1\) In New York, although he met such personalities as Henry James, Sr., and Horace Greeley, he was unsuccessful in his search for a market for his works. After a stay of less than seven months, he returned to his family in Concord.

After his return, he worked at the pencil business for a time and helped his parents build a new house. He visited the woods around Concord as he always had, and in March, 1845, he began preparing a cabin near Walden Pond. The land where the cabin stood was owned by Emerson, who allowed Thoreau to live there in return for the latter's clearing the brier patch.\(^2\) Thoreau moved to Walden in July, 1845.  

Thoreau went to Walden feeling himself ill-attuned to the contemporary world. He had tried different occupations, committing himself to none, he had failed to find a market for his writing, and he was regarded as an oddity by the citizens of Concord.\(^3\) His decision to go to Walden was undoubtedly prompted by those circumstances.

Since Thoreau's decision to go alone to the woods and to remain there away from human company was deliberate, the reasons behind his decision bear investigation. Thoreau himself said that he went to live in the woods because "I wished to live deliberately, to front only the

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\(^1\)Ibid., p. 63.  
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 72.  
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 40.
essential facts of life... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms..." 1 Certainly Thoreau had not been attracted to the life his contemporaries were living, as is witnessed by the fact that he had committed himself to no occupation and that although he was an educated man he was content to be only a handy man. His visit to New York left him with a distinctly unfavorable impression of the city and of the way men lived in the city. 2 Even in the Transcendentalist group, he had found that there was a difference between himself and his fellows: "They were protestant and aloof, so far as most Americans and most of America were concerned, but he was protestant and aloof even from them." 3

Thoreau became convinced, from the totality of his experience, that he had two choices: either to live or to make a living. 4 In his opinion, the two alternatives were mutually exclusive; doing one automatically precluded doing the other. He decided that if he chose to make his living, either by devoting himself to the family pencil business or by doing any other job, he would have to forego those things which he thought really constituted life. And so he chose to live—by moving to the woods where he did as little as possible in the way of

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2 Krutch, p. 64.
3 Ibid., p. 65.
4 Ibid., p. 71.
"work" as it was understood by American society in the 1840's.

Although Thoreau left the woods in 1847 and began writing an account of his experiences as early as 1849, the book Walden was not published until 1854. In Walden, Thoreau gave a factual account of his activities: he described the way he built his cabin, gave a detailed account of how much it cost him to live in the woods for two years, and told what he did with his time in the woods. Although he spent two years at the pond, he condensed the events in Walden so that they seem to have occurred within the cycle of a year. Thoreau included descriptions of the animals he saw in the woods, of the people who came to visit him at Walden, of the way the ice on the pond broke up in the spring. He told how he baked bread, chopped wood, and planted and cared for his beans.

But Walden is much more than the story of Thoreau's life from 1845 to 1847. Throughout the book, and especially in the first chapter and the conclusion, Thoreau put down his impressions of life in the nineteenth century. He made it clear that he, unlike most of his contemporaries, did not regard with optimism all of the trends that were shaping American society.

Thoreau thought that most Americans did not really know what life was all about; because of the way they lived, they had developed a false sense of values. They no longer appreciated or even recognized those things that to him constituted real life. By his withdrawal to Walden, he intended to find out for himself what life really was and he intended to prove to others that there was an alternative to the life
that the ordinary citizen led. Perhaps Thoreau's purpose was not solely to criticize the increasingly industrialized and materialistic society of his time. But *Walden* leaves no doubt that Thoreau found life in New England in the 1830's and 1840's far from perfect.

The preceding discussion reveals the fact that Melville and Thoreau were similar in that each was a "failure" and that neither fit into American society of the time. It is logical, then, that *Typee* and *Walden*, works which proceeded from the authors' experiences with a life different from that which had left them personally dissatisfied, should reflect the authors' criticism of American society of the 1830's and 1840's. Each work criticizes specific aspects of American society which the author found open to criticism.
CHAPTER 4

MAJOR SOCIAL CRITICISMS: MATERIALISM AND PROGRESS

The two major areas of social criticism made by Melville and Thoreau in *Typee* and *Walden* concern materialism and progress, two of the most apparent and most significant aspects of the initial phase of American industrialization. This chapter will first consider materialism and the similarity between Melville's and Thoreau's comments about materialism and then discuss progress and the similarity between the authors' positions in regard to it.

Materialism

The first major area of similarity between *Typee* and *Walden* lies in Melville's and Thoreau's attitude toward materialism. Materialism as a philosophy assumes that life's highest objectives are material well-being and the furtherance of material progress.¹ That materialism should obtain a wide following in the United States was a logical effect of the industrialization process described in Chapter 2 and of the higher standard of living that accompanied it.

Given the circumstances of a new class of wealthy, increased national wealth, the concentration of population in the cities, better communication, and more effective distribution of goods via railroads

and canals, it was logical that the proliferation of new inventions, machines, and gadgets should have immense appeal to the American people. The supply and the ready availability of goods awakened new wants and desires among the people and "stirred all society with aggravated acquisitive tastes."\(^1\) Both Thoreau and Melville showed that they recognized materialism as an important aspect of American society, and both criticized society for its materialistic characteristics.

Although Melville did not directly state that he was opposed to materialism, he made it clear that he thought that preoccupation with material and monetary concerns was the cause of much of the misery and unhappiness that from personal experience he knew existed in the civilized world, including America, of the 1830's and 1840's. Melville made his point by describing the obviously unmaterialistic lives of the natives and by declaring that the carefree and happy nature of life in Typee was due to lack of materialism.

The reason that the natives were not materialistic was that they needed few material things and that those things they did need were readily available. For example, while "a poor European artisan . . . is put to his wit's end to provide for his starving offspring . . . the children of a Polynesian father, without troubling their parent, pluck from the branches of every tree round them" all the food they require.\(^2\)

\(^1\)Beard, p. 727.

The chief item of food in the valley was the fruit of the bread-fruit tree; the Typees prepared the fruit by several different methods, each of which was a relatively simple process. One method, for instance, consisted of grating the meat of a coconut, covering the pounded bread-fruit with grated coconut, and cooking the combination until a delicious liquid bubbled over the fruit.¹

Clothing was no more of a problem than was food, since the islanders dressed in a very simple fashion. Their clothing was made from tappa, a fiber obtained from the trunk of the cloth-tree. The fibrous substance from the trunk was placed in water until it decomposed sufficiently so that it could be pounded with a mallet into any strength and thickness desired. The tappa was then stretched out to bleach and dry. To clothe themselves, the Typees simply draped the tappa around themselves to achieve any desired effect.²

Shelter was equally easily obtained. The natives lived in huts which, although they could be as simple or as elaborate as the owner desired, were constructed at no great cost of either material or labor. They were built of bamboo poles, bark thongs, woven coconut leaves, palmetto leaves, and canes. Furniture consisted of a couch, made from coconut trunks and woven mats, and various tappa-covered packages. Native spears and javelins were the only decorative touches.³

¹Melville, p. 168.
²Ibid., pp. 216-217.
³Ibid., pp. 117-119.
Melville was much impressed with the native dwellings; he praised them at length, saying that "a more commodious and appropriate dwelling for the climate could not possibly be devised."\(^1\) The houses were open to the air, impervious to rain, and were elevated above the damp ground.

Land was an untroublesome matter for the natives. Ownership of land was so unimportant, in fact, that Melville was unable to decide whether the natives owned their land in common or whether certain landed proprietors merely allowed the rest of the people to live where they liked. At any rate, property suits were unknown on the island and neither were there any "musty parchments or title deeds" to stir up disputes over land ownership.\(^2\)

The fact that the natives needed very little in the way of material goods and that their few needs were readily satisfied precluded the existence of a monetary system on the island. Melville attributed the "perpetual hilarity reigning through the whole extent of the vale"\(^3\) to the fact that life in Typee was non-monetary in nature. The chief reason for the Typees' happiness, according to Melville, was that 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 . . . or to sum up all in one word—no Money!\(^4\)

\(^1\)Melville, p. 119.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 295.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 183.
\(^4\)Ibid., pp. 183-184.
Melville emphasized his aversion to the part money played in the Ameri­
can system by calling money the "root of all evil."\(^1\)

Since Melville was personally acquainted with the problems caused
by lack of money, it is not at all surprising that he should have been
pleased with a society in which one did not have to have money to be
provided with sufficient food and clothing to keep himself alive and
warm. As indicated earlier, Melville and his family were neither happy
nor successful in materialistic America. In non-materialistic Typee, on
the other hand, everyone was happy and well provided for. The natives
were carefree and happy and "there seemed to be no cares, griefs,
troubles, or vexations, in all Typee."\(^2\) The natives enjoyed a "perfect
freedom from care and anxiety ..." and Melville said that during his
stay in the valley, "I was well disposed to think that I was in the
'Happy Valley,' and that beyond ... there was nought but a world of
care and anxiety."\(^3\) Obviously such a degree of happiness contrasted
vividly with what Melville called "the tainted atmosphere of a feverish
civilization ..."\(^4\)

To Melville, it was a logical conclusion, then, that materialism
was the cause of the unhappiness he had known in the United States, and
his rejection of materialism on the basis of its connection with misery
and dissatisfaction is understandable. Even in his later life, Melville
was plagued by financial difficulty and his later works reflect the

\(^1\)Melville, p. 184.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 183.
\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 124, 180.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 183.
dissatisfaction he felt concerning the American economic system. He criticized the factory system in "Tartarus of Maids," and he described the blankness of the business world and the frustration of the office worker in "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Thoreau was as thoroughly opposed to materialism as was Melville. There was no question in Thoreau's mind but that materialism was a significant factor in American society. In his opinion, the ordinary man was concerned, to the exclusion of everything else, with the need for making a living and acquiring material goods. The need for money soon became so pressing that it caused people to see everything in terms of money value. For example, cranberries, which Thoreau appreciated for their beauty, calling them "small waxen gems, pendants of the meadow grass, pearly and red,"¹ became to the owner of the cranberry patch something that he saw only in terms of bushels and dollars.

Thoreau deplored all this concern with wealth and goods. He said

I respect not his labors, his farm where every thing has its price; who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get any thing for him . . . whose fields bear no crops, whose meadows no flowers, whose trees no fruits, but dollars; who loves not the beauty of his fruits, whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars.²

Thoreau's opinion was that money should not be the object of all a man's energies. "Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is

¹Thoreau, p. 198.

²Ibid., p. 168.
not required to buy one necessary of the soul."¹

Thoreau, like Melville, rejected materialistic civilization, maintaining that Americans wasted time and energy in pursuit of food, clothing, and shelter. Thoreau acknowledged that food, clothing, and shelter were all necessary because of their relation to animal heat, which he considered synonymous with animal life.² Food was necessary to generate heat, and clothing and shelter were both necessary to preserve the heat. But American concern with appearances and with material advances was so intense that Americans forgot the real purpose of the three necessities and valued them only as an indication of individual wealth.

When Thoreau retired to his cabin at Walden, he lived on a vegetable diet consisting of such things as rye and Indian meal, purslane, salt, pumpkins, beets, and beans. He scoffed at those who asked him how he could survive without any meat, revealing his attitude toward the American economic system when he said that by eating only vegetable matter, he "could avoid all trade and barter."³ Thoreau learned from his experience in the woods that with surprisingly little trouble one could obtain enough food to live, yet because men wanted to eat fashionable foods they had "come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries . . . ."⁴

¹Thoreau, p. 263.
²Ibid., p. 32.
³Ibid., p. 69.
⁴Ibid., p. 67.
With regard to clothing, the American found clothes so important that, in Thoreau's words, "there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable . . . clothes, than to have a sound conscience."¹ In fact, for most men it would be easier "to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloons."² Thoreau pointed out that in America relative rank in society was connected with clothing, but he wondered whether anyone who observed a group of men divested of clothing could tell which ones had a respected place in society.³ He compared the American's passion for "new patterns" with tattooing, saying that "comparatively, tattooing is not the hideous custom which it is called. It is not barbarous merely because the printing is skin-deep and unalterable."⁴

Comfort and fashion in shelter came to be as important as were fashion and distinction in clothing. Thoreau emphasized that a shelter could really be quite simple and still be adequate. He described tool storage boxes, set along the railroad tracks, which struck him as being of sufficient size and comfort to be a dwelling. Instead, most men were "harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this."⁵

¹Thoreau, p. 38.
²Ibid., p. 39.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., p. 42.
⁵Ibid., p. 44.
So far as Thoreau could see, the immediate result of the contemporary world's excessive concern with money was that it caused men to develop a warped system of values. In effect, men became so obsessed with possessions and goods that they missed the essential point of existence. For example, the object of the clothing industry should logically be to clothe the American public; instead, the chief aim was "unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched." As further evidence of the shift in man's values, Thoreau used the example of husbandry, which "was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely."

Thoreau observed that another consequence of materialism was that man's vision became so obscured by his continual struggle for acquisition of material things that he did not even notice himself becoming enslaved by the very things he sought. Because a man spent so much time devoting his entire attention to securing some thing, that thing soon acquired possession of the man instead of vice versa. "And when the farmer has got the house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him." Thoreau said the same thing about a man's animate possessions. "I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men . . . ."

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1Thoreau, p. 42.  
2Ibid., p. 144.  
3Ibid., p. 47.  
4Ibid., p. 63.
Thoreau concluded that it was inadvisable for a man to acquire a collection of material goods because inevitably what he did the rest of his days was determined by his possessions. Thoreau pitied the man who, after long and strenuous effort, "has got through a knot hole or gateway where his sledge load of furniture cannot follow him." ¹ It was apparent, however, that entirely too many of Thoreau's contemporaries had allowed themselves to become so encumbered. As Thoreau remarked satirically, "It would surpass the powers of a well man nowadays to take up his bed and walk, and I should certainly advise a sick one to lay down his bed and run." ²

Thoreau himself was in little danger of being enslaved by material possessions—when he withdrew to Walden, he lived very simply, with only rudimentary furniture and supplies. Thoreau's cabin, which was ten feet wide and fifteen feet long, was furnished with a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a mirror, a lamp, and various cooking and eating utensils, such as a kettle, a skillet, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, and one spoon. ³ He had no decorative touches in his cabin because such things were more trouble than they were worth. For example, "I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find they required to be dusted daily . . . and I threw them out the window in disgust." ⁴ Part of Thoreau's purpose in living

¹Thoreau, p. 70.
²Ibid., p. 71.
³Ibid., pp. 57, 70.
⁴Ibid., p. 49.
at Walden was to prove that it was unnecessary for men to acquire a multitude of possessions, that it was possible to live comfortably without them.

From the preceding evidence, one can see that both Melville and Thoreau recognized materialism's part in American society of the 1830's and 1840's and that both men regarded its presence and effects as detrimental. Melville became aware of the penalties of materialism in civilization when he saw the carefree, happy existence led by the Typees, and Thoreau moved to Walden to discover a life not dependent on material goods.

**Progress**

The second major area of social criticism common to *Typee* and *Walden* concerns progress. The doctrine of progress holds that the entire course of man's existence on the earth has been one of improvement, and that both man and his way of life are better at the present time as a result of the changes that have occurred through the years.¹ Since the 1830's and 1840's were years in which industrialization produced changes that seemed to be obvious improvements, it follows that the average American accepted progress as a fact. In the optimistic spirit of the age, there seemed to be no limit to the progress that America could make. Such a faith certainly undergirded the American Dream.

¹Carl Becker, "Progress," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, XII (1934), 498.
Neither Melville nor Thoreau was an enthusiastic believer in progress as defined above. In fact, each author questioned whether America was making progress at all. The key to their objections was that, as was mentioned above, the average citizen's belief in progress was based on the changes made as a result of industrialization. Those changes all had to do with material improvement; the machines, the inventions, the gadgets were all materialistic changes. Since Melville and Thoreau opposed materialism, there was little reason for them to accept material progress either, even if the latter were being made.

Melville examined two possible areas in which progress might be made—in the human condition and in man himself—and as a result of his examination, he concluded that there had been no progress in either area. Considered in the light of the conventional "progressive" thinking of the day, the natives of the Typee valley were barbarous and totally uncivilized. Logically, then, since the Typees had made no progress, the natives themselves as well as their way of life should have been inferior to civilized men and to life in civilization. Melville concluded, however, that the natives as men were in fact at least equal to if not superior to civilized men and that the natives lived better than did civilized men.

Melville showed that he thought progress worked no real improvement in human nature first by proving the evilness and cruelty of civilized man. Some of the practices and customs which were followed by civilized men served, in Melville's opinion, "to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the
As an example, he mentioned "that custom which only a few years since was practised in enlightened England:—a convicted traitor . . . had his head lopped off with a huge axe, his bowels dragged out and thrown into a fire; while his body, carved into four quarters, was with his head exposed upon pikes, and permitted to rot and fester among the public haunts of men." Another example he used was that of lifetime imprisonment in solitary confinement, which in the United States replaced hanging as punishment for crimes because the former was "more in accordance with the refined spirit of the age." To Melville, imprisonment was a particularly cruel practice—"how feeble is all language to describe the horrors we inflict upon these wretches, whom we mason up in the cells of our prisons, and condemn to perpetual solitude in the very heart of our population."

Civilized men, although they received all the supposed benefits of progress, were not any more virtuous than the Typees. Melville was convinced that "a high degree of refinement . . . does not seem to subdue our wicked propensities." In fact, it was Melville's opinion that "civilization does not engross all the virtues of humanity: she has not even her full share of them. They flourish in greater

1Melville, p. 182.
2Ibid., pp. 181-182.
3Ibid., p. 182.
4Ibid.
5Ibid., p. 23.
abundance and attain greater strength among many barbarous people."¹ Melville said that from his association with the Typees, he "formed a higher estimate of human nature that I had ever before entertained," and he added that subsequent experiences among civilized men "nearly over-turned all my previous theories."²

The second way in which Melville showed that progress had made no improvement in man was by drawing comparisons between the Typees and civilized men. Throughout Typee, as he described the practices, customs, and characteristics of the islanders, Melville made comparisons which showed how little difference there was between a Typee and the average civilized man.

In one such comparison, Melville described an incident which occurred at a shipboard reception given for the island royalty by a French commodore. The royal couple, who were both adorned with tattooing, aroused both interest and amusement among the French naval officers. The king's tattooing stretched across his face in a broad patch resembling a pair of goggles; the queen's legs were tattooed in a spiral pattern that made them look like columns. The amused condescension of the onlookers ended abruptly when the queen suddenly spied an old sailor whose arms, legs, and chest "were covered with as many inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus."³

¹Melville, p. 297.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 9.
and expressed her admiration of his decorative markings. The queen's attention to the sailor aroused great discomfort among the French; Melville, however, apparently found the incident revealing as well as amusing, and his implication of a basic similarity between the native queen and the French sailor is obvious.

Melville drew other parallels between island people and their civilized counterparts. He compared Tinor, the only industrious woman in the valley, to an "exceedingly muscular and destitute widow with an inordinate supply of young children, in the bleakest part of the civilized world." He mentioned three young men of the valley whom he described in terms which brought to mind the playboy type of person from high society; he described young girls whose main pursuit appeared to be "skipping from house to house, gadding and gossiping with their acquaintances." The native girls took pleasure in wearing necklaces, bracelets, and garlands of flowers just as "the beauties of our own land delight in bedecking themselves with fanciful articles of jewelry." When a crowd of islanders gathered around to watch Tommo (Melville) be carried down to the stream on the back of his native attendant, Melville said they "reminded one of a group of idlers gathered about the door of a village tavern when the equipage of some distinguished traveller is brought round previous to his departure."

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1 Melville, p. 122.
2 Ibid., p. 123.
3 Ibid., p. 126.
4 Ibid., p. 129.
On an occasion when a great commotion occurred among the natives as a result of the reported sighting of an approaching boat, Melville described the way some of the people busied themselves collecting fruit and preparing coconuts to sell to the visitors while others "as in all cases of hurry and confusion in every part of the world . . . kept hurrying to and fro, with amazing vigor and perseverance, doing nothing themselves and hindering others."\(^1\) At the Ti, the retreat of the bachelor chiefs of Typee, Melville watched the chiefs and concluded that they were not unlike bachelors the world over, even to the extent of being remarkably capable chefs.\(^2\)

These and other similar comparisons of the islanders and civilized people led Melville to the conclusion that there was little real difference between the fundamental nature of civilized man and the uncivilized islanders. Clearly, progress produced no change in the civilized man's nature or behavior that distinguished him as being better than a savage; in fact, Melville found enough similarities to convince him that human nature was basically the same whether the human enjoyed the material progress of civilized lands or lived on an uncivilized island.

Besides concluding that human nature was not improved by material progress, Melville also decided that life in a civilized nation had no advantages over life in uncivilized Typee; it was his opinion that the

\(^{1}\) Melville, p. 153.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., p. 232.
Typees were happier than were civilized men.

In the valley of Tior, Melville once had the opportunity of comparing the French admiral du Petit Thouars, the commander of the French forces in charge of taking possession of the island, with the patriarch-sovereign of Tior.

At what immeasurable distance, thought I, are these two beings removed from each other. In the one is shown the result of long centuries of progressive civilization and refinement, which have gradually converted the mere creature into the semblance of all that is elevated and grand; while the other, after the lapse of the same period, has not advanced one step in the career of improvement. "Yet, after all," quoth I to myself, "insensible as he is to a thousand wants, and removed from harassing cares, may not the savage be the happier of the two?"¹

After Melville had spent some time actually living among the Typees, he still felt the same way. "As I extended my wanderings in the valley and grew more familiar with the habits of its inmates, I was fain to confess that . . . the Polynesian savage . . . enjoyed an infinitely happier . . . existence, than the self-complacent European."² Melville acknowledged that there were disadvantages to the way the natives lived, but the disadvantages stemmed from lack of material goods. Since the natives were happy despite the lack of such goods, obviously happiness bore no positive relation to the acquisition of material things, and their absence was no real disadvantage.

In addition to his conclusion that the savages were happier than civilized men, Melville noted that life in Typee produced none of the

¹Melville, p. 41.
²Ibid., p. 180.
warped human beings who abounded in civilized nations. There were, for example, no cross old women, cruel step-dames, sour old bachelors, blub­
bering youngsters, or squalling brats in Typee, a circumstance which.
bore further testimony to the fact that life in Typee was indeed a su­
perior existence.

Just as the absence of civilization did not indicate an unsatis­
factory way of life, neither did satisfaction proceed from the mere
presence of civilization—which, as defined in American terms, meant
living in neat houses, being a Christian, wearing clothes, and working--
doing, in short, all those things which accompanied progress. Melville
had a perfect opportunity to evaluate the effects of civilization,
since as was mentioned in Chapter 2 many of the South Sea islands had
recently come under the influence of various countries, the United
States among them, which were trying to improve the natives by "civil­
izing" them—or at least by making them into replicas of their bene­
factors. Because Melville had lived among the Typees, who had not yet
been "civilized," he could compare the Typees with the natives of the
civilized islands he visited in the course of his voyages in the South
Seas and draw conclusions concerning the effects of civilization.

His personal observation of the conditions which resulted when
the islanders were civilized by foreigners convinced Melville that
introducing the outer trappings of civilization had little beneficial
effect among the natives. In fact, much of what the foreigners brought

1 Melville, p. 184.
to the islands was evil.

Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the idolaters converted into nominal Christians, than disease, vice, and premature death make their appearance. 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. Want, disease, and vice, all evils of foreign growth, soon terminate his miserable existence.¹

At Tahiti, venereal diseases brought by the French to the islanders "visited them like a plague, sweeping them off by hundreds."² From his own experience Melville could testify to the fact that the natives of Hawaii "had been civilized into draught horses . . ."³

In Melville's opinion there was not much doubt as to whether or not the natives' lives were improved by the civilization that was imposed upon them. "Let the once smiling and populous Hawaiian islands, with their now diseased, starving, and dying natives, answer the question."⁴ Obviously the introduction among the natives of the material manifestations of civilized life did not improve the natives' lives. The implication of Melville's findings is that he considered progress, which America as a civilized nation was proud of, merely an external thing. Since the external changes and improvements were the only benefits that progress could claim to have given to the natives and since the natives were happier and lived a better life before foreigners came

¹Melville, pp. 288-289.
²Ibid., p. 283.
³Ibid., p. 289.
⁴Ibid., p. 181.
to the islands to impose civilization and progress, mere material progress meant little when compared with the misery introduced among the natives.

Thoreau, like Melville, doubted that any real progress had been made as a result of the changes worked by industrialization. Thoreau showed his reluctance to accept progress as a fact first by questioning the value of some of the things Americans considered "progressive" and second by stating that he did not think progress had improved man himself.

The average American who accepted progress was sure that American society was a real improvement over any previous one. But Thoreau was not so certain. His first attack on progress was to question whether the material conditions in America were as good as most people thought they were. Thoreau's general opinion about the so-called improvements of the 1830's and 1840's was that "there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance."¹

Shelter was one thing on the basis of which he doubted America's material progress. Birds, foxes, and savages alike needed and were able to find shelter, but civilized men were not so fortunate. In the cities, the centers of American progress, housing was especially short; far less than half the people owned a shelter.² Those who did not own a shelter were obliged to rent one, the price of which was prohibitive.

¹Thoreau, p. 60.
²Ibid., p. 44.
enough to cause the occupants to live forever in poverty. The reason that the prices were so high was that the houses came equipped with the "improvements of centuries," such as Venetian blinds, spring locks, and paint, but Thoreau could see no advantage in having such comforts if the result were a rise in price. He said that he would "build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one."2

In addition to the example of shelter, Thoreau also questioned the value of several recent inventions, about which he said, "inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things."3 The railroad was the object of much of Thoreau's criticism; he considered it not so much a symbol of progress as of American materialism. He called it "that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks!"4 and he said that in the case of the railroad as with everything else, "we are inclined to spend more on luxury than on safety and convenience . . . "5

Another thing about the railroad that disturbed Thoreau was that Americans did not even realize how much it had cost them in terms of

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1Thoreau, p. 45.
2Ibid., p. 58.
3Ibid., p. 60.
4Ibid., p. 165.
5Ibid., p. 49.
personal sacrifice to build the railroads. So many men had spent their lives insuring the installation of America's railroads that Thoreau felt justified in saying that the bodies of men served as the ties under the railroad tracks—"we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us." The railroad was an added bit of evidence to prove Thoreau's contention that "men have become the tools of their tools."  

The trouble with many of the inventions that were the basis of America's claim to progress was that they were adopted by Americans in great haste for no clear purpose except perhaps to prove the national genius and progressiveness. Again, the railroad was one of the things that Thoreau criticized on the basis that it had no clear purpose.

Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts "All aboard!" when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over,—and it will be called, and will be, "A melancholy accident." Thoreau did not see any real need for the railroad; he said, "if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads?"

On the same grounds, Thoreau criticized the national eagerness for the laying of the transatlantic cable; in his opinion there was little news of great urgency to pass between the nations. As he put it,

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1Thoreau, p. 90.
2Ibid., p. 49.
3Ibid., p. 61.
4Ibid., p. 90.
"perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."¹ About the overland telegraph, he said, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."²

Thoreau's second argument against progress was that he did not think it had improved human nature. Although Americans had succeeded in changing their physical environment with material goods and with various inventions, they had not improved themselves in the process. Thoreau said that the material things Americans prized were "but improved means to an unimproved end,"³ and that "the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence."⁴ He summed up the relationship between material changes and human nature by saying that "while civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them."⁵

Thoreau's conclusions are similar to Melville's; neither author believed that America's claim to having made significant progress was valid. Melville proved his point by showing that outer material

¹Thoreau, p. 60.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., p. 31.
⁵Ibid., p. 47.
progress had improved neither man's way of life nor man himself. Thoreau refuted progress on the basis of the dubious value of some of the things Americans labeled as progress and on the basis of his contention that material changes produced no change in man.

Lest there be misunderstanding concerning the positions of Melville and Thoreau with regard to progress, it should be emphasized that neither Melville nor Thoreau was opposed to progress or to civilization itself. The point is not that either author was anti-progress or that either thought contemporary man should attempt to live like the Typees or retire alone to the woods; instead, the point is that Melville and Thoreau had both experienced a life in which progress in the usual sense was non-existent and had concluded on the basis of their experiences that progress was merely an external, material thing which had little real value. Melville and Thoreau questioned progress not because they lacked faith in America but because their definition of progress did not accept material advances as evidence of improvement.
CHAPTER 5

MINOR SOCIAL CRITICISMS: UNWARRANTED OPTIMISM

The 1830's and 1840's were, as has already been mentioned in Chapter 2, a period of general optimism on the part of the American people. Americans were optimistic because their nation was prosperous, its living standards were rising, and its future as an industrialized and "progressive" nation seemed assured. American optimism was most characteristically expressed, during the 1840's especially, in the "manifest destiny" idea prompted by a spirit of expansionism.

Although the average American was optimistic, Melville and Thoreau did not share the general temper of the time. They criticized specific aspects of society which to them rendered contemporary American optimism unwarranted. On the basis of the rising poor class, the hurried pace of life, the place of work in the American system, and the complexity of life in America, Melville and Thoreau rejected optimism. Since they rejected optimism, they also criticized America's expansionistic tendencies. This chapter will discuss first the authors' objections to expansionism and then the four phenomena of contemporary society which made them consider the optimistic spirit of the day unwarranted.

"Manifest Destiny" and Expansionism

Melville and Thoreau both objected to "manifest destiny" and expansionism, the chief outgrowths of American optimism. America's
expansionistic tendencies were especially evident in the mid-1840's as the nation spread westward to Texas, California, and Oregon; it seemed obvious that the United States was destined to spread across the entire continent and even to include Hawaii within its environs.¹

Melville's objection to American expansion centered around the missionary movement in Hawaii. The missionaries were undoubtedly acting on the principle that those who were fortunate enough to know the Gospel should carry it where it was not known.² That idea was much in keeping with the general spirit of the nation and with the growth of the churches during the 1830's and 1840's. The years that Melville spent in the South Seas were, as was shown in Chapter 2, years of great activity on the part of the missionaries in the South Seas, especially in Hawaii. Melville was in a position to observe the way the missionary efforts in the South Seas were being carried out, and his conclusion was that they amounted to nothing short of imperialism.

Melville's description of the "enormities perpetrated in the South Seas upon some of the inoffensive islanders ..."³ revealed the imperialistic methods of the missionaries. Melville mentioned, for example, an attempted invasion of the Typee valley. The natives repulsed the attack, forcing a retreat, but "the invaders, on their march back to the sea, consoled themselves for their repulse by

¹Fish, p. 291.
²Ibid., p. 192.
³Melville, p. 37.
setting fire to every house and temple on their route; and a long line of smoking ruins defaced the once-smiling bosom of the valley . . . ."\(^1\)

He related another incident where the missionaries in the course of converting a group of natives to Christianity killed about 150 of them.\(^2\)

In Melville's opinion, the high-handed methods used by the missionaries only succeeded in causing the islanders to become even more barbaric than they had been before the foreigners' arrival. Melville thought that the fierce nature of the islanders could in many cases be traced directly to the activities of the foreigners. He said that civilized men

have discovered heathens and barbarians, whom by horrible cruelties they have exasperated into savages . . . . The cruel and blood-thirsty disposition of some of the islanders is mainly to be ascribed to the influence of such examples.\(^3\)

Another disturbing aspect of these imperialistic actions was that they were not regarded as wrong by the civilization that sponsored them. If such murders, robberies, and other crimes had been committed in America, the criminal would certainly have suffered the consequences, and when similar crimes were committed by the islanders themselves, society's reaction was predictable and instantaneous.

With what horror do we regard the diabolical heathens, who, after all, have but avenged the unprovoked injuries which

\(^1\)Melville, p. 36.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 7.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 38.
they have received! We breathe nothing but vengeance, and equip armed vessels to traverse thousands of miles of ocean in order to execute summary punishment upon the offenders. 1

But when the crimes were committed by the missionaries in the course of their attempts to "civilize" the islanders, they were applauded by society and by Christianity as courageous and just. 2 Such hypocrisy embittered Melville even further when he returned to the United States and found out that the missionaries' activities were more favorably represented in the American newspapers than he had personally found them to be. 3

Thoreau's objections to expansion had to do with the westward movement and with the Mexican War. His reaction to the westward flow of population was one of exasperation. He said, "They tell me of California and Texas . . . till I am ready to leap from their courtyard like the Mameluke bey." 4 His opinion was that America's faith in its "destiny" was misguided. He said that "God is only the president of the day, and Webster is his orator." 5 He asked, "What does the

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1Melville, p. 37.

2Ibid.

3Howard, p. 92.

4Thoreau, p. 264.

5Ibid. (James K. Polk, who had been elected on an expansionist platform, was President while Thoreau was at Walden, and Webster, who favored expansion to the point of including Hawaii within the sphere of American influence, was the most famous orator of the day [Fish, p. 193]).
West stand for?" and he warned Americans that they should "start now on that farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific . . ." Thoreau thought that America's eyes were focused so much on material things that as a result the expansionist President became God and the West was regarded as an end in itself. Thoreau's transcendental beliefs would not allow him to accept the reasons the average American gave for moving to the West.

The most famous action of Thoreau's life was perhaps his refusal to pay the Massachusetts poll tax, a refusal which caused his arrest one day in July, 1846, when he came from Walden to have a shoe mended. The reason Thoreau refused to pay the tax was that he objected to being obliged to support the Mexican War. Thoreau mentioned the incident twice in Walden, saying once, "I was seized and put into jail because . . . I did not pay a tax to . . . the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house." Another time he said, "The only true America is that country . . . where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war . . ."

His comments reveal that he objected to the Mexican War on the 

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1Thoreau, pp. 257, 258-259.
3Thoreau, p. 149.
grounds that it was an expansionist move on the part of the American slaveholders, a move designed to secure more slave territory. It was this opposition to slavery and to the motives behind the Mexican War, that prompted Thoreau to refuse to pay his tax. Although the jail incident became famous later, after Thoreau had written "Civil Disobedience" in 1849, the comments in Walden reveal that Thoreau's ideas can be traced back to the earlier time of his stay at Walden.

The Poor

One of the aspects of society which caused Melville and Thoreau to be dubious about American optimism was the existence of the poor class. Although historical evidence does not point to the fact that there was any phenomenal rise in the number of American poor between 1830 and 1850, it is true that the new wealth created as a result of the beginning of industrialization was unevenly distributed among the classes in American society. This uneven distribution of wealth combined with the concentration of wealth and with the concentration of industrial workers and immigrants in the cities, another result of industrialization, to produce the emergence of slums in the cities. Therefore, it may be assumed that although the poor class was certainly not of the proportions it was to reach in the late nineteenth century

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1 Meltzer and Harding, p. 163.
2 Fish, p. 328.
3 Beard, pp. 641-642.
when industrialization was an accomplished fact, it was beginning to emerge in the 1830's and 1840's as a problem of industrialized society.

Whatever the dimensions of the problem may have been, both Melville and Thoreau were concerned with its existence. Melville indicated his awareness of the poor class in society of the 1830's and 1840's by citing the lack of such a class in Typee, praising that lack as one of the advantages of life in Typee. Perhaps remembering the desperate circumstances of his own family, he noted that in Typee there were 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 ..."¹

The reason that there were no poor in Typee was that there was very little difference in the relative wealth of the natives. Although some individuals were wealthier than others in that they had, for example, bigger couches, more packages of tappa, or more sleeping mats, the differences could easily have been remedied had the less well-provided owner cared to improve his position. If he had wanted more tappa, the native could have obtained it without difficulty—all he had to do was go through the simple process already described in Chapter 4.

Just as there were no poor people in Typee, neither was there any crime. The absence of significant differences in wealth removed the motive for theft. Melville said the natives "slept securely, with

¹Melville, p. 184.
all their worldly wealth around them, in houses the doors of which were never fastened. The disquieting ideas of theft or assassination never disturbed them."\(^1\)

Thoreau considered the existence of the poor to be one of the ironies of contemporary society. He said that the luxury of one class—those who benefited from industrialization—was balanced by the indigence of the degraded poor.\(^2\) In his opinion, "it is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages."\(^3\) The most ironic situation was that beside the railroad, America's latest improvement, were the shacks of the poor, the people who had helped build the railroad. Thoreau described the shacks as sties, and he said that "the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery . . ."\(^4\) The condition of these people, a condition which to Thoreau was strikingly like that of the Egyptian slaves who labored to build the pyramids but were probably not even buried themselves, served to prove "what squalidness may consist with civilization."\(^5\)

\(^1\)Melville, p. 294.
\(^2\)Thoreau, p. 47.
\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 47-48.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 48.
\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 47, 48.
Uneven distribution of wealth was disturbing to Thoreau not only because it allowed a segment of the population to be destitute in the midst of spreading affluence but also because it was to him, as it was to Melville, the cause of crime. He said that thefts and robberies "take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough."¹

Pace of American Life

Another reason, expressed in both *Typee* and *Walden*, why Melville and Thoreau regarded American optimism as unwarranted concerned the pace of American life. In the 1830's and 1840's, people lived faster than they ever had before, and the difference in the speed of life was a significant point of contrast between this period and the preceding periods in American life. "It is clear that it was at this time that Americans became hustlers." During the period there was "unquestionably a general urge to be up and doing." One evidence of the faster pace of life was the introduction of the "quick lunch."²

The fast pace of contemporary life may be attributed in part to industrialization which with its machines and its factory jobs demanded more time and effort from the average American. The restless pace of life was directly related to the generally optimistic spirit of the period, a spirit which was itself traceable to industrialization. To

¹Thoreau, p. 150.
²Fish, p. 3.
Melville and Thoreau, however, the pace of American life was a disturbing element, and they both regarded the hustle and bustle of life in the 1830's and 1840's with misgiving.

Melville indicated his disapproval of the fast pace of American life by describing with obvious pleasure the leisurely pace of life in Typee. In contrast with civilization, which he described as feverish, life in Typee was peaceful and quiet. Melville said that "one tranquil day of ease and happiness follows another in quiet succession . . . the history of a day is the history of a life."¹ The Typees spent their days bathing, eating and resting, collecting flowers or polishing spears, smoking and conducting cheerful conversation. At night they gathered together to chant, tell stories, and dance. Such leisurely and pleasant enjoyment of essentially unproductive activities was certainly unknown to Melville in his early American life, when he had had to leave school and go to work when his father died. The pleasure he took in the apparent lack of purpose of life in Typee contrasts with the dissatisfaction he had felt in America where every man's life was directed toward a goal.

Instead of praising the absence of hurry in his life at Walden Pond, Thoreau explicitly condemned the frantic pace of the life led by most Americans. He characterized his era as "this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century," and of the nation as a whole he

¹Melville, p. 219.
said, "It lives too fast." Men were in so much of a hurry that they could no longer take time to appreciate their surroundings. Thoreau noticed, for example, that many of the men whom he saw in the woods, perhaps out for a Sunday stroll, did not genuinely enjoy being there. Thoreau called them "restless committed men, whose time was all taken up in getting a living or keeping it."

Furthermore, in Thoreau's opinion, all the hustle and bustle of modern existence was merely an illusion; he said that although men seemed to be moving very fast, in reality they were "deadly slow," because they, like their inventions, had no clear purpose. All the restless activity of his contemporaries only proved to him that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation."

Thoreau himself had no desire to lead such a life, and he did not understand why anyone else would want to do so. "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises?"

Thoreau's opposition to the pace of life was one reason for his decision to "withdraw" to the cabin at Walden Pond. There he could watch the animals, he could do what he wanted to do, and he could live without hurry.

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1 Thoreau, pp. 264, 90.
2 Ibid., p. 135.
3 Ibid., p. 92.
4 Ibid., p. 28.
5 Ibid., p. 261.
The Value of Work

Closely related to the hurried pace of American life was a belief in the value of work, usually regarded as part of the "Protestant Ethic." Since the purpose of economic activity in capitalist America was to acquire money and goods, it follows logically that work, the usual method of acquiring money and goods, should have had a corresponding importance in the life of the average American.¹

A citizen in industrialized, materialistic, and progressive America had little choice but to work to keep abreast of the rest of society and to achieve the goals that were important to him as an American. Faith in the value and the power of work was clearly a causative factor in the fast pace of American life; to acquire more goods and to compete with their neighbors, Americans worked harder and faster than ever. Since Melville and Thoreau objected to hurried living and to materialistic goals, they also criticized American belief in the value of work, considering the importance of work to be grounds for further suspicion of America's optimistic attitude.

Melville often mentioned that the Typees did no work of any consequence and did not struggle to make a living. He said that

the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee; for . . . 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.²

¹Werner Sombart, "Capitalism," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, III (1930), 196, 201.
²Melville, p. 287.
It must have seemed ironic to Melville that a people who were barbarous and ignorant by American standards should live in happiness and comfort without working while the enlightened American had to work hard all his life, perhaps never attaining the goal he worked for. Melville's own experiences with work and his observation of the lack of work in Typee convinced him that "work" was questionable if not worthless in value.

Thoreau did not believe in the value of work any more than did Melville; the two years he spent in the woods at Walden, where he did no more "work" than was necessary to keep himself warm and fed, were a repudiation of the American conviction that someone who did not do something to earn his living was a person to be regarded with suspicion. The fact that although Thoreau eventually became the nominal head of his father's pencil business he did not commit himself to it or to any other occupation shows that he had no intention of allowing work to become the focus of his life as it was in the lives of so many of his contemporaries.

Despite the fact that most men worked hard, they gained little from their effort. Thoreau said he knew farmers who had worked for forty years to "become the real owners of their farms . . . but commonly they have not paid for them yet."

The process seemed even more ridiculous to Thoreau in light of the fact that a man spent the greater part of his life working to earn money to enjoy in his old age by which time he was rendered incapable of enjoying what had taken so long to

\[1\text{Thoreau, p. 46.}\]
earn. He summed up his opinions by saying, "As for work, we haven't any of any consequence," meaning that all the work men did in their lives was essentially inconsequential because it was done in pursuit of materialistic goals which Thoreau regarded as unnecessary.

Complexity of Life

Another aspect of society of the 1830's and 1840's which both Melville and Thoreau criticized was the increasing complexity of contemporary life. Complexity, like the hectic pace of life, accompanied the beginning of industrialization in the United States; life with machines, growing cities, and more public institutions among other trends was more complex than life in colonial America. Neither Melville nor Thoreau approved of the complexity characteristic of their time, and they found it another aspect of society which was more worthy of raising doubts than of arousing optimism about America.

Melville showed his opposition to the complexity of American life through his praise of the contrasting simplicity of the lives of the Typees. What impressed Melville the most about life in Typee was the simplicity of the natives' relations with each other. One result of that simplicity was that the natives genuinely enjoyed each other's company and were completely natural with each other. In Typee, "you

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1Thoreau, p. 61.
2Ibid., p. 91.
3Krutch, p. 5.
might have seen a throng of young females, not filled with envyings of each other's charms, nor displaying the ridiculous affectations of gentility. Melville said that to compare the "stiffness, formality, and affectation" of the women of high society with the "artless vivacity and unconcealed natural graces" of the women of Typee would be like comparing a milliner's doll with the Venus de Medici.

Because the Typees were natural, sincere, and unaffected, other areas of their lives could be simple, too. For example, they needed no elaborate social institutions to protect one man from another. Although the islanders had a chief, the authority the latter exerted over the people of the valley was so mild that Melville remained for some time ignorant of the identity of the chief, a fact by which "the simplicity of the social institutions of the people could not have been more completely proved. . ." In addition, Melville noted that no trials were ever conducted while he was there and that "to all appearances there were no courts of law or equity." Neither were there any police. "In short, there were no legal provisions whatever for the well-being and conservation of society. . ." 

While Melville indicated his disapproval of the complexity of

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1Melville, p. 184.
2Ibid., p. 237.
3Ibid., p. 275.
4Ibid., p. 293.
5Ibid.
American society by praising the contrasting society he found in Typee, Thoreau showed his opposition by deploiring the lack of simplicity to be found in any aspect of American society. Unlike the Typees, Americans were artificial and insincere, and relations between Americans were anything but simple. Thoreau said, "I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices."¹

To Thoreau, American lack of simplicity was revealed most graphically in the increasing institutionalization of life in the United States. Thoreau thought that Americans depended too much on public institutions "in which the life of the individual is to a great extent absorbed."² The end result of man's dependence on the institutions in his life, such as the church, the government, and the schools, was that individuality was disappearing from the American scene. It was becoming difficult even to attempt to be an individual because "wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society."³ Thoreau's attitude toward institutions was that "no doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself."⁴

¹Thoreau, p. 264.
²Ibid., p. 144.
³Ibid., p. 149.
⁴Ibid., p. 56.
The increasingly institutionalized character of American life was reflected economically in extensive division of labor, which created an intricate web of inter-relationships and inter-dependencies that made it, in Thoreau's opinion, nearly impossible to ignore the fact that "we belong to the community."¹ Thoreau referred to the intricacies of life as "the bogs and quicksands of society" and he considered a life under such regimented conditions to be a "dead dry life."²

Thoreau's objection to the complexity of American life was part of the reason behind his decision to move to Walden. His idea of what America should really be was that it was a place where one was at liberty to pursue whatever sort of life he desired to live.³ Because the machine age with all its specialization and inter-relatedness prevented men from showing individuality and living their own lives, Thoreau thought that a "stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life . . ." was the only way to preserve his individuality. His intention was to "Simplify, simplify."⁴

¹Thoreau, p. 56.
²Ibid., pp. 264, 266.
³Ibid., p. 174.
⁴Ibid., p. 90.
Although Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau are usually considered to be basically unlike in their work, there is a striking similarity between *Typee* and *Walden* as social criticism. There is evidence in the lives of both Melville and Thoreau to indicate that neither man was satisfied with or "successful" in the developing industrial society of the 1830's and 1840's. Both authors criticized American society on the basis of specific aspects stemming from the industrialization process which was beginning in the 1830's and 1840's, and those criticisms as expressed in *Typee* and *Walden* lend themselves to comparisons between the ideas in the two works.

Melville's and Thoreau's main criticisms of society concerned materialism and progress, two factors basic to American society of the 1830's and 1840's. They rejected materialism as a philosophy, and they concluded that American "progress" was only a material, external improvement rather than a basic change for the better either in man himself or in man's life.

Melville and Thoreau also rejected the optimistic spirit prevalent in America during the 1830's and 1840's. The authors' reasons for regarding American optimism as unwarranted concerned four aspects of society of the 1830's and 1840's: the poor class, the pace of American life, the place of work in America, and the complexity of contemporary existence. Because Melville and Thoreau regarded American optimism
with reservations, they were opposed to "manifest destiny" and expansionism as characteristic outgrowths of that optimism.

The foregoing criticisms of American society, each of which is to be found represented in both Typee and Walden, show that there are similarities in the ideas expressed in the two works. As social criticism, Typee and Walden are basically in agreement.
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