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Racism, Slavery and Religion as “Machinations and
Deceptions” in Benito Cereno

At the end of the short story Benito Cereno, by Herman Melville, Benito Cereno tells Captain Delano:

"you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted. But you were forced to it; and you were in time undeceived. Would that, in both respects, it was so ever, and with all men." (pg. 1166)

In the context of the story the statement is simply an attempt by Benito Cereno to redeem or excuse Captain Delano for spending an entire day on the San Dominick in the midst of a precarious and not very well executed act orchestrated by the rebellious slaves, and not only failing to realize that the slaves had revolted and were using the few remaining living Spaniards as puppets to take advantage of him but also wrongly concluding that Benito Cereno was maliciously orchestrating the act. However, the reader, with a more objective viewpoint of the events clearly understands that it is not the elaborate act that misleads Captain Delano but his slow-wittedness and his subconscious racism.

Furthermore, as noted by Cochran, in the context of the story the statement is highly ironic as Benito Cereno's complicity in the slave trade makes him difficult to perceive as “innocent” and Captain Delano's qualities are not those of a best man.¹

Thus, if the statement made by Benito Cereno is so obviously hollow and lacking in truth, it leads one to question how the passage contributes to the short story beyond simply giving us insight into the Spanish captain's character. In his essay Cochran presents one interpretation, arguing that the passage is purposefully ambiguous so that it is easy to replace Benito Cereno in the passage with Babo.¹ Cochran argues that the

change makes the passage more truthful and Melville's intent in designing the passage in this way is to subtly ridicule what the story presents upfront to encourage the reader to seek greater meaning by carefully delving into the story and questioning the comfortable outright "truths" presented by the various narrators in the story.¹ However, the fact that the passage is very philosophical, ambiguous in whom it refers to, hollow if considered specifically, and located in a separate segment at the end of the novel suggests that it has greater significance. These attributes of the passage suggest that the theme described in the passage, if carefully extracted, is the major theme of the short story. This theme is that individuals, regardless of their merit, tend to interpret the behavior of others through the filter of "machinations and deceptions", and that blinded by these, inevitably fail to see the true circumstances of others and the true reasons for why others act in the manner that they do, thus passing erroneous judgment on others. In Benito Cereno this theme manifests itself in three ways. First, the theme reveals itself in Captain Delano's misjudgment of the occupants of the San Dominick due to the "machinations and deceptions" of racism, societal stereotypes and preconceived ideas. Secondly, the theme is manifested in the idea prevalent throughout the short story that it is only the "machinations and deceptions" imposed by system of slavery that make us either condemn the slave holders or in Melville's time the slave, and that in reality it is the system of slavery that defines the roles of both and deceives us into judging one or the other. And finally the theme is exposed in Benito Cereno being painted as a victim of the Inquisition by the revolted slaves that ironically are trying to prevent the truth from being uncovered in order to make Captain Delano the Inquisition's next victim. This suggests

that religion is a source of “malign machinations and deceptions” used to ensnare individuals and subject them to torture and suffering.

As already described in the introduction Captain Delano spends an entire day on the San Dominick observing the act put on by the rebellious slaves with the subdued Spaniards as their puppets. The act is very poor and the stage, the ship, renders it even barer. In many instances the true state of affairs is almost thrust at Captain Delano. For example, Captain Delano observes a black boy striking a white boy on the head “inflicting a gash from which blood flowed”, six Ashanti slaves suspiciously polishing hatchets and four old slaves overseeing the others, a white sailor getting thrown to the ground and numerous instances of Babo behaving suspiciously and incriminatingly. (pg. 1122) Captain Delano views these abnormalities with suspicion; however, because of his racism and tendency to stereotype, he completely misjudges the situations of the parties that he is observing and thus their behavior, leading him to pass erroneous judgment. He never exclusively and seriously suspects the slaves of malicious intentions and instead of indicting Babo indicts Benito Cereno with attempting to murder him.

As suggested by Eleanor Simpson, Captain Delano’s racism manifests itself heavily in his patronization of blacks.² Simpson illustrates her point of view with the passage²,

“In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.” (pg.1141)

The passage, where blacks are compared to Newfoundland dogs, implies that Captain Delano views all blacks as harmless, stupid, unsophisticated and most importantly blindly loyal if well taken care of. Simpson suggests that Melville is condemning this patronization.² Whether this is the case or not, the patronization

significantly alters Captain Delano's understanding of the affairs aboard the ship.³ His subconscious condescending view of blacks prevents him from even entertaining the idea that the blacks have rebelled, are plotting against him and mean him ill-will.³

Captain Delano's perception of Babo illustrates this point especially well. Upon first observing Benito Cereno, Captain Delano notes that "by his side stood a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended" (pg. 1115) As Delano associates Babo with the image of a loyal dog which we have already discussed, it is clear that he immediately discounts Babo from being a threat. Even more tellingly, Delano ascribes benign and loyal thoughts and feelings such as "sorrow" and "affection" to Babo before he ever converses with him. Delano's form of racism continues to blind him to Babo's true situation and character even as he closely interacts with him. For example, when Babo is about to shave Benito Cereno, Captain Delano, in considering Babo as a barber, ponders that blacks have an "easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune" and that blacks have a "docility arising from the un aspiring contentment of a limited mind and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors." (pg. 1140)³ Thus, Captain Delano does not act or follow through on the suspicions that arise in him when he observes the trembling Benito Cereno being prodded to concoct a story with Babo's razor at his throat; not even when Babo nicks Benito Cereno upon Captain Delano's expressed "incredulity" about the Captain's story. (pg. 1144) A final event which clearly illuminates Captain Delano's judgment of Babo being affected by the "machinations and deceptions" of racism involves the apron that

Babo chooses for Benito Cereno during shaving. When Captain Delano observes Babo take a multicolored cloth and use it as an apron for Benito Cereno he reflects that he is “amused with an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows.” (pg. 1141) When later the multicolored cloth reveals itself to be “The Castle and the Lion”, Captain Delano instead of questioning Babo about his choice of apron, quips to him that "it's all one, I suppose, so the colors be gay" clearly showing how his racism interferes with his senses and his better judgment. (pg. 1142) It is important to note that Captain Delano’s limited viewpoint is not restricted to Babo in the short story as he in numerous instances misjudges the other slaves on the ship in a way similar to the way he misjudges Babo.

Melville renders the theme more clearly by making the real character of Babo almost the opposite of the stereotypical character that captain Delano assigns to him. At the end of the short story, via the deposition, the reader discovers that Babo, far from being a blindly loyal, stupid and docile servant, proves to be a very cruel, ruthless, intelligent, deceitful and ambitious leader. The reader discovers that it is Babo, who planned and led the revolt, ordered the death and maiming of Don Alexandro Aranda and other sailors, tortured and manipulated the sailors surviving the revolt and orchestrated the complex and ambitious plan to capture captain Delano’s ship that almost succeeded. Furthermore, Babo emerges as skillful actor with great intellect, who manages to effectively control Benito Cereno and manipulates Captain Delano at the same time for the entire day. The contrast between Captain Delano’s stereotypical perception of Babo and Babo’s true nature serves to emphasize how far racism and the tendency to stereotype can mislead one in judging another’s character and the folly of pursuing such a course.

It has been often noted that Captain Delano appears to be stupid, and inasmuch seems to be suggested at various junctures in the short story. Thus, it can be argued in refutation to the thesis just presented, that it is stupidity and not racism or prejudice that prevents Captain Delano from discerning the truth while he is aboard the ship. However, a theory proposed by Rohrberger casts significant doubt on Captain Delano's idiocy.⁴ Rohrberger suggests that the narrator in the short story subtly undermines Captain Delano's choices and observations, highlighting the flaws in his judgment.⁴ This implies that Captain Delano is not actually stupid and that the narrator simply makes him appear to be so in a covert manner.⁴ If this is the case, then it can be argued that by undermining Captain Delano with the narrator, Melville is illuminating for the reader, as the story progresses, the fact that Captain Delano is completely misjudging the situation aboard the San Dominick.⁴ This sets up an irony, allowing the reader to be aware of the true situation aboard the San Dominick while leaving Captain Delano unaware of the act about him.⁴ This situation is necessary for the reader to observe that Captain Delano is misjudging the occupants of the ship because of his racism. If the reader were not aware, via the undermining narrator, that there was a slave revolt or a similar treachery beneath the subterfuge, then the fact that Captain Delano was misjudging characters because of his racism would not be so readily apparent.

Melville presents another "machination and deception" that induces individuals into making widely accepted but false judgments, slavery. A careful reading of the short story suggests that Melville is trying to illustrate that the system of slavery tends to deceive those observing it into either condemning the character of the masters and favorably judging that of the slaves or condemning the character of the slaves and

favorably judging the character of the masters, when in reality either choice leads to a mischaracterization of both parties. The mischaracterization occurs in both cases because the system of slavery disguises the characters of those involved in it, leaving the observer to judge the mold of the master or the mold of the slave. In effect those who partake in the system of slavery assume either the character of the master or the character of the slave, which disguises their true nature and makes judging the true character of either party very difficult if not impossible.

One aspect of Benito Cereno in which the theme manifests itself is in the multiple slave-master role reversals that occur over the course of the short story. The first slave-master role reversal occurs when the slaves on the San Dominick revolt and conquer their Spanish masters. The rebellious slaves then assume the roles of the masters and the conquered Spaniards assume the roles of the slaves. It is apparent from the deposition that from the moment this reversal occurs the freed slaves immediately begin to act like stereotypical masters if not worse. For example the cruelty of the freed slaves and their lack of regard for human life, a quality typical of the stereotypical slave master, is immediately evident shortly after the revolt takes place, as the slaves throw “three men, alive and tied, overboard” (pg. 1157) The freed slaves also show the traditional slave master quality of resorting to threats and instilling fear by violence. The most poignant example of this occurs when the slaves kill their former owner, Don Alexandro Aranda, and mount his skeleton on the prow of the ship as “a warning of what road they should be made to take did they or any of them oppose him” (pg. 1159) Over time the slaves even begin to exhibit the traditional excessive suspicion and fear of being overtaken by their captives, killing at the slightest misgiving without confirming if their fears are warranted.

For example the former slaves impulsively kill a mate called Raneds as he arouses their suspicions by performing the innocuous motion of “handing a quadrant” to Benito Cereno. (pg. 1160) Thus, the slaves fully assume the character of the master when the positions of the masters and the slaves are switched. The Spaniards can do nothing but act like slaves, as they have no free will and are under the constant fear of death. To further the idea that it is the role that defines the character in the system of slavery not the individual, Melville incorporates a second role reversal into his story. When Captain Delano finally recaptures the San Dominick, the surviving rebelled slaves become slaves again and the Spaniards become the masters again. Immediately the Spaniards begin to act the role, killing slaves. The crew of the Bachelor’s Delight also partakes in the violence against the slaves. The general violence against the slaves after the second role reversal is evidenced by an excerpt from the deposition:

--that, beside the negroes killed in the action, some were killed after the capture and re-anchoring at night, when shackled to the ring-bolts on deck; that these deaths were committed by the sailors, ere they could be prevented. That so soon as informed of it, Captain Amasa Delano used all his authority, and, in particular with his own hand, struck down Martinez Gola, who, having found a razor in the pocket of an old jacket of his, which one of the shackled negroes had on, was aiming it at the negro's throat; that the noble Captain Amasa Delano also wrenched from the hand of Bartholomew Barlo a dagger, secreted at the time of the massacre of the whites, with which he was in the act of stabbing a shackled negro, who, the same day, with another negro, had thrown him down and jumped upon him; (pg. 1164)

The passage not only indicates that the moment the Spaniards become masters again their characteristics switch to those associated with that role as well, but that the American sailors begin to act like the stereotypical master as well when slaves are placed under their command. The behavior of the American sailors suggests that anyone put into the position where they have full control over other human beings will behave in a particular fashion, regardless of their character.⁵ The only exception to this appears to be Captain Delano and Benito Cereno. The explanation for the latter’s failure to fall into the mode of

the master again is that he is portrayed as the only character in the novel who comes to an understanding of the meaning of slavery as a result of his experience. The explanation for Captain Delano's failure to assume master like characteristics can be attributed to the fact that he is not truly the master of the slaves and has enough morality to not assume the role. Thus, it is evident, that it is difficult to judge the true characters of the Spaniards and the blacks beneath the "machinations and deceptions" of the system of slavery as they assume the characters of the roles that they fill.

Symbolism in *Benito Cereno*, also suggests that those who partake in slavery conform to particular characters. A particularly telling symbol is the stern piece of the *San Dominick*. A dual meaning to the stern piece of the *San Dominique* on which there is "a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" has been suggested by Dekoven.³ (pg. 1114) Dekoven suggests that the figure represents both the despotic rule of the blacks after they take command of the ship and the general principle of slavery.³ Dekoven supports the former idea by indicating that when Captain Delano finally realizes that the Blacks are in revolt they are described as "with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt."³ (pg. 1153) Dekoven, supports the latter symbolism of the "dark satyr" with two segments of the short story, one describing the general principle of slavery just before the stern piece is described, and the second describing how Captain Delano "ground the prostrate negro (Babo)" into the bottom of the boat who is "snakishly writhing" immediately prior to the unmasking.³ (pg. 1153) While Dekoven's analysis appears to be valid we can utilize the evidence that he presents and take the analyses one step further. Melville is clearly alternating which race is standing with its "foot on the prostrate neck

of a writhing figure". Thus, Melville suggests that if slave and master are interchanged, there will be no change in either the slave master relationship or the characteristics of the individual filling each role. That is the former slave will immediately assume the characteristics of a despotic master and the former master will immediately assume the characteristics of a slave if a switch occurs. The fact that the figures in the image on the stern piece are wearing masks further suggests that slave and master can be interchanged and that each behaves according to the position that he is in.

The structuring of Benito Cereno around a religious Inquisition presents another "machination and deception" in the story that misguides individuals, religion.⁶ To understand how this is the case we must first examine how the theme of the Inquisition manifests itself in the story, which is evident if we examine Bernstein's argument. Bernstein suggests that the blacks led by Babo are leading the Inquisition against Benito Cereno.⁶ Bernstein supports this is by pointing out that the blacks aboard the ship are linked to two monastic orders, which led the Inquisition and that Benito Cereno is linked to a monastic order that was prosecuted by the Inquisition.⁶ More specifically, the blacks are likened to the Saint Dominicans and the Franciscans, orders that were at the forefront of the Inquisition, while Benito Cereno, by the suggestiveness of his first name, is likened to the Benedictine Friars who were prosecuted during the Inquisition.⁶ Bernstein further supports the notion of an Inquisitional structure to the story by pointing out the Inquisitorial theme of two scenes. The first scene he examines is the one where Babo forces the captured Spaniards to pledge their support to him in front of Don Alexandro Aranda's skeleton.⁶ Bernstein suggests that the episode expresses the underlying theme of the Inquisition as the proceedings are similar to an auto-de-fé (act of faith), a ritual

performed with heretics during the Spanish Inquisition during which they were forced to repent on an elevated platform or be executed.⁶ However, it is the second scene that Bernstein examines, the scene in which Babo shaves Benito Cereno that reveals how the story suggests that religion is a “machination and deception.”

When Babo shaves Benito Cereno in front of Captain Delano the scene is replete with imagery of the Inquisition.⁶ Benito Cereno is seated in a “grotesque engine of torment” and the room contains “two long, sharp-ribbed settees of Malacca cane, black with age and uncomfortable to look at as inquisitors' racks” and a “a claw-footed old table lashed to the deck; a thumbed missal on it, and over it a small, meagre crucifix attached to the bulk-head.”⁶ (pg. 1140) Babo, with his razor on Benito Cereno’s neck when Benito is sitting in the “grotesque engine of torment”, appears to be the Inquisitor, Benito Cereno the victim, and Captain Delano the observer. However, the irony of the scene is that Babo is not attempting to make Benito Cereno confess, the professed goal of the Inquisition. On the contrary, the “Inquisitor” is making Benito Cereno lie to Captain Delano. Furthermore, the Inquisitor is making Benito Cereno lie in order to affect Captain Delano’s perception of the state of affairs on the ship, so that his ship can also be taken over by the Inquisition and that he too can be subjected to the same Inquisition that Benito Cereno is subject to. In interpreting this irony, we must consider that Benito Cereno was published twenty one years after the Spanish Inquisition was disbanded, so Melville cannot be criticizing the Inquisition directly, he must be criticizing what it represents. Since the Inquisition is but an extreme of religion, it is reasonable to assume that Melville is criticizing just this. Melville by means of the shaving scene is suggesting that religion, since the Inquisitor is making the victim lie to garner more victims instead

of making the victim confess, is a “machination and deception” intended to betray individuals into falling subject to it; consequently subjecting them to torture and making them suffer.

This notion of religion as a blinding and misguiding influence is further evinced in Captain Delano. As, we have already discussed, racism plays the most significant role in Captain Delano’s inability to perceive the true state of affairs aboard the *San Dominick*, however, his religion contributes as well. In a number of instances when suspicious events stir doubts in Captain Delano about the nature of those on the ship he buries them in religion. For example, after an incident in which a sailor tries to alert him to the Black rebellion by throwing a “Gordian knot” knot at him Captain Delano quells the suspicions that arise by taking solace in the fact that “there is some one above.” (pg. 1136) In another instance Captain Delano even feels “a tinge of remorse, that, by harboring [doubts] even for a moment, he should, by implication, have betrayed an atheist doubt of the ever-watchful Providence above.”(pg. 1151) These passages clearly show that Captain Delano’s adherence to religion is contributing to his erroneous judgment of the situation aboard the ship and supports the idea that the short story is suggesting religion is a “machination and deception.”

In our examination of *Benito Cereno* we have mostly focused on the major “machinations and deceptions” in the story, racism, slavery and religion, that either mislead Captain Delano, the reader, or possibly both Captain Delano and the reader. However, we have failed to focus on a critical issue in regard to the “machinations and deception” which Benito Cereno raises in his speech regarding the matter. Benito Cereno at the end of his speech hopes that “all men” subject to “malign machinations and

deceptions” should eventually be undeceived. (pg. 1166) The fact that this statement is in reference to the “machinations and deceptions” which we have carefully highlighted over the course of the essay suggests that this too is a major theme of the short story. A careful examination of the short story, however, reveals that in some ways, Melville suggests that the “machinations and deceptions” should be kept in place. This evidenced in the short story by the fact that while Captain Delano’s racism and religion lead him to misjudge the situation aboard the ship and the nature of the ships various members, in the end his inability to see the truth saves his life. Captain Delano himself points out that “acuteness might have cost me my life” as if he realized the truth and betrayed that knowledge to the rebels, he would have been instantly killed. (pg. 1166) Also, the individual that eventually reveals the truth and clear up the”machinations and deceptions”, Benito Cereno, suffers for a few months after the revelation before dying. However, certain aspects of the short story also suggest that failing to clear “machinations and deceptions” can be equally dangerous, as had Benito Cereno not taken a risk and revealed the truth, Captain Delano and his ship would have met the same fate as Benito Cereno and the San Dominick. Thus, Melville depicts the complexity surrounding “machinations and deceptions”; that it is not clear whether they should be retained or revealed and that there are serious consequences if either path is taken.

Endnotes

- ¹Cochran, Robert. "The "Little Lower Layer": Herman Melville's Carefully Disguised Heroes." Phylon (1960-) 40.3 (1979): 217-23.
- ²Simpson, Eleanor E. "Melville and the Negro: From Typee to "Benito Cereno"." American Literature 41.1 (1969): 19-38.
- ³Dekoven, Marianne. "History as Suppressed Referent in Modernist Fiction." ELH 51.1 (1984): 137-52.
- ⁴Rohrberger, Mary. "Point of View in "Benito Cereno": Machinations and Deceptions." College English 27.7 (1966): 541-6.
- ⁵Vanderhaar, Margaret M. "A Re-Examination of "Benito Cereno"." American Literature 40.2 (1968): 179-91.
- ⁶Bernstein, John. "Benito Cereno and the Spanish Inquisition." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 16.4 (1962): 345-50.

Other Works Examined

- Emery, Allan Moore. ""Benito Cereno" and Manifest Destiny." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 39.1 (1984): 48-68.
- Kaplan, Sidney. "Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of Benito Cereno." The Journal of Negro History 41.4 (1956): 311-38.
- Magowan, Robin. "Masque and Symbol in Melville's "Benito Cereno"." College English 23.5 (1962): 346-51.