

Race, racism and slavery in violent antebellum america

Literature



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Despite the progress our country has made since its inception, we still live in a racially categorized society. Some of us are the causes, and some are the victims of it. But what exactly does it mean to racially categorize somebody? Could it be by skin color, by dialect, by culture? Most commonly, one would not be able to give a clear answer, or the same answer as another would. The majority of our peers just go along with these ideas and they are taught generation after generation. However, there are those select few people who question the idea of racially categorizing people, and seek an understanding and a reason.

Most of the time they come up empty-handed, for they find there is no logical understanding. Racial categories are simply man-made and created by society. A few thinkers during Antebellum America to have different views of society during the time of slavery were Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Herman Melville. Several of these different views were on the institution of slavery and racism. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Benito Cereno are the three corresponding texts.

These three classic American texts prove that race is purely a social construct and that slavery is an institution that only results in violence and tragedy. In addition, they deploy the use of irony to voice their abolitionist arguments. Racial classification began centuries ago when hierarchies were created and dominant groups emerged. According to scientists in today's world, race is a social and cultural creation and not a biological concept. The idea of race began as a way to classify people of their differences in appearance and culture.

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When European explorers traveled to lands and saw people that looked different from them, they associated their behavior and culture with their appearance. In America centuries ago, before slavery, people did not distinguish between people because of skin color, but rather social status. Poor whites and blacks used to work and intermingle with each other, as well as accumulate land, vote, and testify in court on the basis of equality. They even got married and had children with each other. Race was non-existent and “ racial categories were fluid” (RACE).

In Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, the poor whites and blacks, together, rebelled against the wealthy colonists. But soon the white colonists found that having indentured servants was not very stable, and by mere happenstance, African slavery became more accessible and plantation owners turned to African slaves for work and labor, and freed many of the white servants (RACE). Later on, the concept of race emerged, when the freed whites began to distinguish themselves with the wealthy white people and slavery became associated with Africans and dark skin color.

It was not until the introduction of freedom and a nation of equality that questions about slavery came about. In order to justify slavery in a free nation, the concept of inferior peoples was born. Thomas Jefferson, in his Notes on the State of Virginia, said, “ I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that blacks ... are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind. ” Because this concept of inferiority arose, this was an excuse to deny blacks the equality of all men and thus, an excuse for the continuation of slavery.

In Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe "humanizes" slaves during a time which slaves were regarded as nothing more than property. By showing that slaves have emotions and are as human as the whites, she makes a bold anti-slavery statement. In Chapter 11 of Uncle Tom's Cabin, George Harris, a mulatto, disguises as a Spaniard and walks into a bar.

The narrator describes as so: "He walked easily in among the company, and with a nod indicated to his waiter where to place his trunk." It is bizarre how someone who could so easily blend in with white society is condemned to a life of slavery because of his "race. In addition to this, he spoke fluently and also invented a machine for cleaning hemp. George's master, Mr. Harris, afraid of feeling inferior to his slave, took him out of the factory and put him back to "hoeing and digging." Stowe here clearly makes her stand on racial classifications and its artificiality. Had this man chose to live his life as the Spaniard, he could live as a free man. But because he has black blood and is considered "black," he is a slave because slavery is associated with the concept of blackness, not just the appearance of blackness. In chapter VI of the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Mrs.

Auld starts to teach Douglass the alphabet and how to spell small words. When Mr. Auld found out about this, he says "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world." After Douglass overhears this, he realizes the strategy whites use to keep blacks enslaved. By keeping blacks uneducated and unaware, they are kept in bondage. While Douglass was enslaved, he taught himself how to read

and write. His writing was very eloquent and whites could not believe that a black man could produce such a work of literature.

Douglass was living proof that race is clearly a man-made conception. After Douglass escaped slavery, his eloquent speeches drew huge crowds. Whites were amazed by Douglass' intelligence and mannerisms. Because Douglass was educated like a white person, he was treated as so (at least in England and Ireland). Any animosity toward Douglass was strictly because of his skin color. The fact that a black man, when given the opportunity to learn, can become just as educated, if not more educated than a white man, shows how illogical race and racism is. The institution of slavery keeps men like Douglass in bondage who are capable of being leaders.

Herman Melville's story of Benito Cereno uses irony to argue against the institution of slavery. The character of Babo is a genius and the heroic leader of the slave revolt. Although it is not revealed until the end of the novella, the black slaves were in control of the ship the entire time. Because Captain Delano is a racist and cannot consider the fact that blacks have power over the whites, he is played the entire time he is on the ship. This is humorous because if he knew how absurd the concept of race was and was aware that blacks are humans with brains and capable of intelligence just as himself, he would have caught on to the scheme.

Instead, it is the black slaves that take advantage of the naivety of the New England sailor. The fact that a successful mutiny took place itself is Melville's way of expressing hope for the abolitionist movement. In addition, the character of Babo, much like Frederick Douglass and the characters in Uncle

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Tom's Cabin, give the white audience a different perspective of black slaves – not as property but as fellow humans. Babo is a clever human being and comes up with the brilliant plan which is executed to the point where Delano does not figure out that Benito Cereno is not in control of the ship.

Melville's story is ironic because instead of Babo being successful, the whites ultimately re-capture the ship and re-enslave the blacks. Rather than a celebration of a likeable character, Melville chooses for Babo to be mutilated to death. The audience, as well as Benito Cereno in the end, is greatly affected by Babo's tragic end. The narrator describes Babo in the closing paragraphs: " As for the black--whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot--his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. What the audience is left to feel is sympathy for Babo – a captured slave who used his intelligence to escape the evils of human bondage.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Benito Cereno all present slavery as an institution that only results in violence and tragedy. Throughout his narrative, Douglass presents the reader with several instances of brutality toward slaves. In Chapter IV, Douglass tells of a murder of slave, Demby, by Mr. Gore. Mr. Gore had whipped Demby and Demby ran into a creek to soothe the afflictions. Demby refused to come out of the creek after being ordered by Mr. Gore, so Mr. Gore shot him in the face. Mr. Gore was not charged with murder and he was still highly respected in the community. Douglass details more murders of slaves committed by slave owners in the same chapter. A Mr. Thomas

Lanman killed two of his slaves, “ one of whom he killed with a hatchet, by knocking his brains out. ” The wife of Mr. Giles Hicks killed Douglass’ wife’s cousin, a girl of about fifteen years old. Mrs. Gillis beat the young girl to death with a log of firewood, breaking her nose and breastbone after she failed to wake up after hearing the baby cry which she was to watch after.

A warrant was issued for the arrest of Mrs. Gillis, however it was never served and she was never punished. Under the ownership of Covey, Douglass was whipped numerous times and nearly beaten and worked to death. The conditions Douglass describes are horrendous and unimaginable to the modern reader: “ Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger. ” Douglass, after a long time of being abused and mistreated by Covey, had enough, and fought him back one day.

The two fought for nearly two hours in the stable. In the six months after, Covey did not whip Douglass once. Douglass presents plain cruel and obscene instances of violence toward slaves. Contrary to the fictional texts of Benito Cereno and Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Douglass’ narrative is non-fictional. Because the text is non-fictional, Douglass gets an emotional response out of his readers who are appalled by the cruelty of the institution of slavery. The fight between Covey and Douglass shows that slave owners are just as prone to violent attacks as the slaves are.

Neither slave nor slave owner avoids violence or tragedy. This is exactly the case as well in Benito Cereno. The original captain of the San Dominick, Alexandro Aranda, is killed in the slave revolt on the ship. Babo dies in the

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end and Benito Cereno is left “ broken in body and mind” from the effects of the institution of slavery. Near the end of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Tom is beaten and “ smote to the ground” by his master Simon Legree. In a sad scene, Tom dies in the arms of George Shelby, who came back to buy back and rescue Tom.

The inherent good Tom is beaten to death and George Shelby loses a dear friend – death and tragedy as a result of slavery. No matter what medium through which we study the history of America, whether it be non-fictional works or fictional works of literature, or film, we are reminded of the cruelties of slavery and the wrongs of racism. Racial categories may never be fluid in the near future, but we can all learn to break free of social constructs and value people for who they are and not just what meets the eye. We must emphasize the tragedy of the mistakes of the past, and make a strong effort not to repeat them.