

The illusion of  
superiority in the  
narrative of the life of  
frederick douglass  
an...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer has remarked: “ Unlike our ancestors, white people never reveled in their names, they glorified in knowledge and power. But the deceiver is still the deceiver, the liar is still the liar with his knowledge and power.” Many colonial figures have pondered the unjust discrepancy between the definitions of the European identity and the native indigenous identity. Toer, among others, also addresses the issue of deception – white masters using deception both to maintain a constructed sense of superiority over the indigenous natives and to deceive themselves into disregarding the ignominy of this crime against humanity. In observing this topic, it is important to differentiate between authority – which was a very concrete sense of power the white people owned – and superiority in racial identity, which is a fictional value constructed by the white people in power themselves. The discrepancy in racial identity is discussed and portrayed in Frederick Douglass’ non-fiction work *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Herman Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno*. In both works, the authors portray the self-discovery of the oppressed Africans and their realization of the deception of the established essentialist view of themselves. This awareness of reality is juxtaposed with the white man’s constant self-deception when faced with the humanity of the Africans, thus challenging the white readers of the time to deconstruct their impression of racial superiority. The ambiguity of race and identity is oftentimes utilized to construct an essentialist perception of a certain race – an action that oftentimes allowed races in a position of power to intentionally construct an inferiority complex to the other races in their midst. In their discourse “*Racial Formations*”, Michael Omi and Howard Winant state that race itself is an invented socio-historical concept that is often used as a political tool. Omi <https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

and Winant present how “ Our compass for navigating race relations depends on preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like. Comments such as, “ Funny, you don’t look black” betray an underlying image of what black should be. .... Race becomes ... a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world.” (21-22) Omi and Winant is basically reviewing the concept of essentialism – that a certain race or people group would have stereotypical and essential properties. The reason race becomes such an effective weapon is because society’s perspective and expectations of a certain race tends to shape people’s essentialist perception of others and themselves – it has the amazingly powerful capability to change how people view and shape their identity. This is true both in European imperialism and the institution of slavery in the United States, where despite differences in the economic utilization of indigenous natives, the same issue of race superiority prevails. In both cases, this concept becomes a social chain; an African slave is suffocated by the concept that he is essentially an obedient working machine, thus prompting him to abide by those essentialist standards. The utilization of this forced identity as a political tool used by white power-wielding figures is an issue evident in literary works by colonized and enslaved writers. Throughout history the white man uses deception to establish a constructed sense of superiority over his province. Both Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville dramatize the issue and instigate action in the part of the readers to further realize and be challenged by this inconvenient truth. In both *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Benito Cereno*, the white characters use race as a political tool and enforce an essentialist view of the African slaves. In both cases, this argument is portrayed through the narrator’s analysis of white

<https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

masters and slaveholders. In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, this is most flagrantly evident in the masters' mistreatment of the slaves as creatures as low as commodities or animals. The language of violence and the whip was often used, for instance to prevent a slave from stealing fruits from the garden (Douglass, 13). The white masters' treatment of the slaves as animals dictated that they were simple-minded, sub-human and understood only the language of violence. This in turn conditioned a fearful obedience in the African slaves. Since slaves found with tar on them would be beaten for attempting to steal fruits from the garden, the slaves "became as fearful of tar as of the lash" (13) – a sentiment eerily similar to conditioned response in animals. This establishment of the African racial identity as inferior and simple minded did take its toll, as is evident in Frederick Douglass' alienation as the only African slave in his community to actually understand the tragedy of being "a slave for life" (34). This is juxtaposed with the experience of other slaves who had fallen victim to the white master's social tool and had accepted their fate without questioning, as can be seen from the way Douglass stated that he envied those "fellow slaves for their stupidity." (35) Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* echoed similar concepts, though the fictional characters' psychological reaction is more ambiguous. In this novella, even white masters who treated Africans with vestiges of kindness are portrayed as people who still reject the notion that an African slave possesses the same potential as a human being. This is most clearly seen in the character of Delano, who despite his fondness of African slaves viewed them condescendingly as simpleminded. This can be seen from his light hearted yet patronizing remarks, most notably regarding Babo in the following passage: "There is something in the Negro which, in a <https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person ... as though God had set the whole Negro to some pleasant tune. When to all this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment ... Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs." (Melville, 208) On one hand, Delano treats and perceives the Africans in a manner much more humane than the slaveholders portrayed by Frederick Douglass. However, the pleasantries are accompanied by syntax and diction such as "the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind" and "blind". These word choices parallel the subtlety of the rhetoric used by Melville, yet still manage to interrupt the positivity of the imagery presumably used to genially describe the Africans. Another disorienting notion is the simile used by Delano between taking "to Negroes" and "Newfoundland dogs." The parallel drawn by Delano between Africans and animals are clearly degrading. Despite his kindness, he still contributes to a dehumanizing notion of racial identity and reinforces the established black identity as "limited" in mind, susceptible to "blind attachment", gullible and completely innocuous. In techniques of varying dramatic effect, both Douglass and Melville address the issue of enforced racial identity and its powerful role in the oppression of that race. However, unlike Douglass, Melville does not portray the effect that this enforced racial identity has on the Africans nor does he show that the white man's enforced deception ever succeeds. This is mostly due to the narrative technique used, which only allows the readers a glimpse into Delano's stream of consciousness. Despite these differences in subtlety and structure while setting the context, both authors arrive at the same argument in which the African characters defy this stated essentialist

<https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

racial identity. Although the readers are accustomed to a one-dimensional portrayal of the African race as working machines, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Benito Cereno* thoroughly explore the emotional and intellectual capabilities that an African slave is capable of attaining. This stands in stark contrast with the white masters' conjecture on the character of the African slave stated above. Once more, different techniques are employed to develop the complexity of their characters; Douglass uses rhetoric to portray his enlightenment and self-discovery, whereas Melville uses imagery and narrative techniques to describe the Africans. In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, his rebellion began when Mr. Auld chastised his wife for teaching Douglass how to read. Douglass finally realized the deception of the white man's essentialist perspective, stating that: "These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man."

(Douglass, 29) However, with this hopeless realization came encouragement for Douglass to defy the doom of slavery. Mr. Auld stated that knowledge would make him "unmanageable ... discontented and unhappy" (29). Mr. Auld's anger subtly exhibited a fear of being threatened and troubled by Douglass' potential for learning. This encouragement was later realized, as Douglass "finally succeeded in learning how to write" (38) after much perseverance. Beyond that, Douglass eventually also developed a mature political voice and actively contributed in abolitionist discussions. (100) He defied the essentialist expectations set by the white slaveholders that their potential was subhuman. In *Benito Cereno*, Melville makes a similar

<https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

argument regarding the intuitive capabilities of the indigenous natives – a potential which is oftentimes disregarded by their white masters. Melville portrays Babo's cunning and intelligence in political organization to execute a successful mutiny. Babo possesses the cunning and language skills to communicate and deceive Delano, who remains oblivious to the actual situation despite various hints by the sailors until the end. Another disconcerting imagery which impresses Babo's strength and dominance upon the readers occurs in the conclusion: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, ... met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked toward St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; ... three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader." (Melville, 249) The passage addresses an imagery of Babo's continued defiance and courage in meeting "the gaze of the whites", viewing them as equals instead of superior beings, perhaps due to Babo's realization of his own empowerment and the white's self-constructed superiority. Moreover, the passage again repeats "follow the leader," a phrase carved on the mast of the ship that had been interpreted several ways in the audience's mind. During the first observation of a satyr in a mask oppressing a man, it seems to be the manifestation of the Master's iron fist. With the image of Babo as Benito's faithful servant, perhaps Benito himself is the leader. Later, when the realization comes in and the mast falls revealing Aranda's skeleton, the readers are compelled to assume this macabre imagery with Arranda as the position of "leader." However, this passage again presents a double meaning where the readers can conclude <https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

that Benito's "leader" is Aranda or Babo, thus placing the African slave in an authoritative position over a white man. This is reinforced by the way Benito was mentally scarred by his experience with Babo. When Delano asks him what is casting such a ghostly shadow upon him, he answers "the Negro." Either way, through the reality of black empowerment and the illusion of white superiority, both authors disconcert the white readers and prompt them to question their perception of the indigenous natives they oppress. Both Douglass and Melville emphasize the self-deception and deliberate ignorance of the white power wielding characters when faced with the humanity of the Africans in order to challenge the readers. Although both authors address the concept of deception as part of the race struggle, each portrays them differently. In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass specifically addresses this in Mr. Covey's personality. Apart from his ability to deceive the slaves and instill a permanent sense of fear (Douglass, 67), Mr. Covey most notably "deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God" (54). Through this passage, Douglass implies that Mr. Covey had to resort to self-deception to confirm that his treatment of the slaves was justified, perhaps due to his position of power or due to the lowliness of the black race. The theme of self-deception and the white man's self-constructed superiority is also specifically addressed by Douglass when he discusses drunkenness: "The slaveholders not only like to see the slave drink of his own accord, but will adopt various plans to make him drunk. ... many of us were led to think that there was little to choose between liberty and slavery. We felt, and very properly too, that we had almost as well be slaves to man as to rum. So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>



and marched to the field feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery.” (65-66) Once more, the diction “deceived” is used significantly. Immersing the slaves in either work or drunkenness was a method used by the white slaveholders to prevent them from thinking about freedom. The white slaveholder enslaved them through labor and through physical pleasures. This echoes Toer’s quote in the beginning – the only way in which the white masters were superior was in their cunning in maintaining this constructed sense of superiority and deceiving the Africans into slavery. On the other hand, Melville uses a significantly different and subtle technique in highlighting the white man’s ignorance and self-deception. Melville uses the narrative technique and Delano’s stream of consciousness to show the readers his blindness and his inability to comprehend the situation. Despite the eeriness of the situation, Delano constantly brushes away any suspicions he may have due to his “singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable ... to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man” (Melville, 163). Delano possesses specific preconceived notions regarding specific human identities. In observing Benito Cereno, it was his belief in the goodness of mankind that allows the American to continue to trust him. In observing Babo and the African slaves, it was his established perception of Africans that prevented him from being able to consider them capable of any kind of malice or important achievement – in this case, a mutiny. It was Delano’s singularly defiant commitment to his essentialist perspectives that caused him to deceive himself and blinded him from reality. As stated above, several discrepancies remain in the two portrayals. Douglass portrays a twofold concept of <https://assignbuster.com/the-illusion-of-superiority-in-the-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-and-benito-cereno/>

deception which is used by the white slaveholders against the African slaves and against themselves. He questions the inferiority of the African slaves to both sides. To the white slaveholders, he questions whether it is just to treat a fellow human being with such violence and disregard. To the other African slaves, he questions whether they are inferior or equal to their white counterparts. However, Melville singularly presents a theme of self-deception on the part of the white masters. No evidence shows that the African slaves were ever deceived into surrendering fully to the white authorities. He mainly addresses the white audience and questions whether Delano's and their own over simplified perception of Africans is truly accurate. The works by Douglass and Melville juxtapose the ignorance of the white slaveholders and the humanity of the African slaves. The complexity of the latter's character defamiliarizes the readers from their established essentialist view of African slaves and thus challenges the white readers to acknowledge those slaves' humanity. Both authors pose two questions: first whether the white colonizers are of a higher humanity compared to the other races they oppress, second whether the black man's potential implies a need for a shift in paradigm regarding slavery and racism. It is left to readers to answer these questions for themselves. Bibliography: Douglass, Frederick. Frederick Douglass: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. New York, NY: Penquin, 1986. Melville, Herman. Billy Budd and Other Tales. New York, NY: Signet Classics, 2009. Ore, Tracy E., Michael Omi, and Howard Winant. The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality. Dubuque: McGraw-Hill, 2011.