

# Don benito cereno: no future without the past

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A. P. English September 22, 2012 No Future Without the Past By: Bernice Mojica “ But the past is past; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves. ” “ Because they have no memory,” he dejectedly replied; “ because they are not human. ” “ But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, Don Benito, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades. ” With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, Senor,” was the foreboding response. “ You are saved, Don Benito,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “ you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you? ” “ The Negro. ” (pg. 75) -Melville, Herman. Benito Cereno. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. , 1990 Don Benito Cereno’s epiphany over the mistake of underestimating the Negroes keeps him moralized upon the past, rather than accepting his wrong doings and modifying them into optimistic beneficial accomplishments.

To prove that his way of thinking is keeping him from moving on, Captain Delano advises him that, “ the past is past; why moralize upon it? ” Delano is letting him know that he can’t hold himself back from a great future based on a rotten past. Although selfishness is looked upon as a sinful thought, pleasing one’s self is still considered a good intention. Delano comforts Cereno by indirectly assuring him that he should never regret what has been done, because during the moment of that action, there was always a reasonable purpose to be followed.

Those experiences taught him how to become a better human being; hence, if he didn’t go through any of that, he would not have the current regretful

feelings he has at the end of the novel. Delano alludes to Benito that if the world is able to metamorphose, then so can he; " See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves. " These are all forms of our dynamic nature which juxtapose Benito's static character. Don

Benito comes to realize that the population he had once tortured is the same as those who have morally and mentally saved him. This is translated when Captain Delano asks him, " you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you? " and Cereno replies that " the Negro" is what has cast the shadow upon him. The Negroes aboard the San Dominick represent " blackness". Therefore, Cereno is implying that blackness is the evil within human nature, which the black ethnic group metaphorically represents.

Blackness is a connotation of an actual color, and in this case, it is also the live image of what us humans believe stands for worthlessness and diabolic. This comparison is an oxymoron to what Cereno is referring to. If you recall, Cereno had stated that he was saved because of this blackness; which I had just mentioned was unholy. This contradiction establishes how there is no future without the past; how you cannot grow without a base to keep yourself standing. There is no need for change if there is nothing destructive keeping you from reaching your goals.

Cereno believes he himself was the destructiveness keeping the Negroes from fulfilling their wishes of being able to see their families again. This brings about the empathy that the reader feels towards him in the end. With this passage being at the end of the novel, it clearly exhibits a stable theme for the novel as a whole. Race seems to be the common denominator

throughout the story. This is supported by the fact that it was written during the 1850's; when slavery was most popular.

Melville seems to realize that this sort of power over other humans was morally wrong and he did not agree with what was socially acceptable. Our generations have been taught that we should never judge a book by its cover, therefore, we should not judge a man by his color. You should never underestimate a man based on what he doesn't have, but rather estimate his power based on what he does have. Now that Don Benito Cereno comes to terms with the equality of all men, he took the first step into admitting his mistakes and chooses to follow a leader rather than being one.