

Democracy in question



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America has long been recognized as a democratic nation, a nation operating under the will of the people. The forefathers of America fought incessantly against British tyranny to start anew in a land of freedom and opportunity. Because America revived the ancient Greek ideology of democracy, the nation was set apart from the rest of the world and was revered for the freedom and justice it provided its people. However, not everyone thinks that American democracy means freedom and liberty. On the contrary, writers such as Henry David Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" and "Slavery in Massachusetts," along with Herman Melville in "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby the Scrivener," suggest that democracy can actually oppress and restrict the individual. In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau criticizes the American government for its democratic nature, namely, the idea of majority ruling. Like earlier transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau believes in the importance of the individual. In a society where there are many individuals with conflicting perceptions and beliefs, Emerson chooses passivity and isolation to avoid conflict with others. However, unlike Emerson, Thoreau rejects passivity and challenges his readers to stand up against the government that focuses on majorities over individuals. Thoreau argues that when power is in the hands of the people, the majority rules, "not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest" (Thoreau 64). Thoreau portrays this very fundamental element of democracy, where power belongs to the majority, as a brutish fight where the strongest wins. In later passages, Thoreau describes the majority in a democracy as men who "serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies," where "in most cases there is

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no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense" (66). He feels that those who belong to a democracy are essentially machines controlled by the majority, lacking in ability to make choices for themselves. He then goes farther to compare the majority to slaves, saying, "When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished . . . They will then be the only slaves" (Thoreau 70). Thoreau repeatedly condemns the democratic system for its lack of morality and tendency to disempower the individual. In "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau offers an analogy that seems convincing, but proves to be inadequate. He argues that in a democracy, "if the majority vote the devil to be God, the minority will live and behave accordingly, and obey the successful candidate, trusting that sometime or other . . . they may reinstate God" (Thoreau 103). Thoreau clearly neglects the converse scenario. What if the minority votes the devil to be God and the majority live accordingly? Which is more just? These questions seem to be better addressed by a less outspoken writer, Herman Melville. In "Benito Cereno," Melville presents several symbolic images of democracy. Amasa Delano, the American ship captain, seems to be the representative democratic figure. The narrator depicts him as being good-hearted, optimistic, and an able captain who runs an orderly ship. However, at the end of the novella, the reader finds that Amasa does not realize the San Dominick has been overthrown by the captive slaves because he is so grossly naïve and ignorant. Ironically, Amasa, the representative of American freedom and democracy, comes to the rescue of the San Dominick to aid in the recapturing of slaves. Amasa's American ship is interestingly named Bachelor's Delight, which is a historical

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reference to a ship owned by a Northerner that avoided the subject of slavery. But perhaps Melville named the American ship as such because he thought that Americans were actually behaving like delightful bachelors in a land where people of other ethnicities are very much a part of the social make-up. America is a partnership, or in a sense, a marriage of the various ethnicities that reside within the nation. By enslaving the Blacks, Melville might be insinuating that Americans have inappropriately acted as bachelors, neglecting and even abusing those whom they live with simply because they have become the majority. The San Dominick is also a microcosm of democracy. Just as Thoreau suggests, the majority overpowers the few, however, in this case, the majority is fighting for a benign cause, which is their own freedom. Yet, when the story reveals the atrocious acts committed by the captives during the takeover, Melville shows just how barbarous a majority rule can be. The captives use brute strength to gain power and have no regard for authority, as evident in the vicious killings of Don Alexandro Aranda, the slave owner, and Raneds, one of the ship's mates. In the end, the slaves are recaptured by Amasa and his men; once again, a demonstration of the majority ruling, "not because they are most likely to be in the right . . . but because they are physically the strongest" (Thoreau 64). When Amasa boards the San Dominick for the first time, he finds the ship in a deplorable state. Because it is a slave ship, Melville uses the ship's decrepit condition to convey the moral corruption of slavery. Some may argue that it is because the slaves took over the ship that the ship becomes disorderly, but how are the slaves to know how a ship is run? Like so many other skills that their masters withheld from them, the slaves were most likely never taught how to run a ship. The majority, in their efforts to

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suppress the minority, has denied the slaves of this knowledge. Melville also comments on democracy in "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The story reveals at the end that Bartleby was fired from his employment at the Dead Letter Office at Washington. Despite the insignificance of his subordinate clerk position at the Dead Letter Office, he was part of the nation's democratic government, but as a result of a change in administration, he was unexpectedly fired. While having feelings of betrayal and hopelessness looming over him, he becomes a scrivener. There, he continues to suffer from the oppression of the majority. In the scrivener's office, Bartleby is clearly the minority against the majority of Nippers, Turkey, Ginger, and their boss. When Bartleby begins to refuse to do what he is told, his co-workers threaten him physically, just as Thoreau predicts a majority would do in "Civil Disobedience." In many aspects, Bartleby is Thoreau's ideal man. Bartleby does exactly what Thoreau urges people to do, which is to stand up against the oppression of a democracy. He does not back down from his co-worker's threats and practices "Civil Disobedience," which Bartleby literally does by politely repeating, "I would prefer not to" (Melville 19). However, Bartleby is never able to assert his will, but only say what he prefers not to do. When his boss asks him, "'Will you, or will you not, quit me?'" Bartleby answers, "'I would prefer not to quit you'" (Melville 24). Bartleby stands firmly against the powers of democracy, yet, does not gain anything from it. Bartleby only begins to further realize the futility of his existence and his will turns into mere preferences under the oppression of democracy. According to Melville, Thoreau's radical suggestions will only lead to disorder and destitution. The slaves aboard the San Dominick rise up against the oppressive majority, and as a result, there is bloodshed and chaos. The

slaves revolt, and in the end, they find themselves in the same, or even worse, situation than prior to their uprising. In "Bartleby the Scrivener," Bartleby chooses to protest against both the democratic government that fired him and the domineering majority at the scrivener's office by refusing to do anything that is asked of him. He does not know what he wants, for his will had already been crushed by democracy, all he knows is that he does not want to do what others tell him to do. His rebellion finally leaves him huddled up in a corner between two prison walls, famished and dead. It seems that Thoreau and Melville both agree that democracy, where the majority rules, is restrictive to the individual. Yet, they differ in that Thoreau provides a definite answer to deal with the oppression of democracy, while Melville offers no apparent solutions. Thoreau urges people to rebel against the tyrannical majority and take whatever measures necessary, but Melville simply exposes the repressive nature of democracy and leaves it at that. However, Melville does point out, through "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener," that simply rebelling against democracy, as Thoreau proposes, is not the answer. Perhaps Melville does not have a solution, just as Bartleby did not. Nonetheless, to both writers, democracy continues to be a despotic institution.