

Benito cereno by herman melville

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How would individuals define “evil”? How would their perspective of the “evil character” change if they were introduced to the story from a different angle? As readers approach to the novella *Benito Cereno* by Herman Melville, they could easily trace down the evil of Babo, who revolts against Benito Cereno and causes a significant amount of bloodshed. However, it is merely the most “superficial” layer of the entire story. At the beginning of the novella, Melville depicts the majority of the scene in the color grey—a color between black and white. This choice seems to be trivial, yet it essentially symbolizes Melville’s interpretation of “evil”: evil is neither pure black nor white.

Notwithstanding Melville seems to endow his characters with “absolute” positive or negative value, his goals are to prove that once people, even the formerly suppressed, gain power, they would tend to turn that power into abuse over the other individuals. Even though the character Babo features the majority of evil among the three characters, his sufferings and desire for freedom justify his violence to some degree. Babo is an epitome of the slaves who have endured an unimaginable amount of discrimination and suppression during 1800s. In the 1800s, inequality was no more than a common and “acceptable” American ideology. Inequalities that raged over American society was like a sharp dagger to the slaves: the slave owners could freely capture and trade slaves, and could even enforce violence on the slaves during slave trade. At the beginning of the revolt, T Babo’s decision to fight for freedom is undoubtedly out of superior bravery, and more importantly, because of the suppression of Benito Cereno.

As Captain Delano observes on the ship San Dominick, there are many signs of “ the African love of bright colours and fine shows” (12, Melville). These signs reveal the slaves’ love of their own culture, conveying to the audience how indispensable it is for the slaves to sail back to their homeland.

Considering such loyalty and bravery of Babo, he is more like a spiritual leader for those who are “ chained” by the suppressor. Babo witnesses the cruelty of unjustified treatment to the slaves and determines to fight for the sake of liberty and independence. Therefore, despite the violence that Babo later conducts, the initial intention of Babo’s “ evil” derives from his bravery to strive for the natural rights that he deserves, proving that neither “ black” evil nor “ white” innocence are absolute.

Although Delano is deemed “ innocent”, his inability to recognize the slave revolt on the ship proves his racism. When Babo first grabs Delano’s attention, Delano calls Babo a “[f]aithful fellow”, and even tells Cereno that “[he] [envies] [Cereno] such a friend.” (20) This imagery may give the audience a sense that Delano considers Babo as equals. However, his following words completely break such a visionary. As Delano further “ praises” Babo’s fidelity, he tells Cereno that he wants to buy Babo and asks “[w]ould fifty doubloons be any object?” (40). Uttering these words, Delano exposes his discrimination towards the black slaves by equating low social status with the black slaves.

Delano’s initial “ innocence” makes a stark contrast against his latter racist behaviors or words. Further, in the majority of Delano’s narration, he references Babo as “ the black” instead of by name, for he does not think slaves like Babo deserve a name like their Captain. As Delano notices one

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unusual sign followed by another, he should have been able to notice the occurrence of slave revolt through a series of oddities, including one time when “[Cereno’s] physical distress became so great” (41). Delano’s denial of the possibility of revolts is due to his inner belief that the black are too inferior physically and intelligently to rebel against the white. For instance, when Delano sees two black slaves beside a mariner, he sees them as “[t]he sleepy-looking blacks performing the inferior function of holding the outer parts of the ropes for [the mariner]” (43); Delano later expresses his attitude on races by directly pointing out that “[t]he whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race” (47). Therefore, rather than innocence, Delano’s inability to treat the black slaves as equals is what leads to his failure to notice the revolt.

Such an inability exemplifies Melville’s notion on the “greyness” of evil by revealing the evil side of Delano who appears to believe innocently in the kindness of human nature. Although Melville appears to endow Babo with evil nature and Delano with benevolent one, his ultimate goal is to present the weakness of human nature exhibited by the desire for power. This, furthermore, is the best explanation for the reason why Melville not only presents the violent conductions of the black slaves, but also those of the white. In Cereno’s narration, he sees the start of slaves’ revolt when “the Negroes revolted suddenly, wounded dangerously the boatswain and the carpenter, and successfully killed eighteen men of those who were sleeping upon deck” (92). During the revolt, some of the black slaves mercilessly murder the Spaniards by using “handspikes and hatchets, and others by throwing [the Spaniards] alive overboard, after tying them” (92).

On the other hand, Melville depicts the imagery of the Spaniards' violence as well. When the Spaniards decide to defend themselves against the slaves, "[n]early a score of the Negroes were killed. Exclusive of those by the [American musket balls], many were mangled" (88). The revelation of both the black and the white's violence may seem contradictory. It is, however, how Melville uses both perspectives to reflect each other, conveying his notion of human nature that one shows greed once becoming empowered no matter the race.

The audience might notice how the slave owners represent the evil initially, while the slaves begin to use violence to fight against such evil. What Melville essentially tries to convey is the belief that he holds for human nature: evil does not always manifest in one's character. Rather, it is an inherent weakness lying in the human nature of all individuals and becomes visible once people own powers allowing them to dominate over others. There is no pure evil or kindness lying behind Babo and Delano. Rather, the author Melville intends to demonstrate that the essence of human nature the characters own is neither pure "evil" nor pure "benevolence", and to reveal human's greed for power embodied by Babo and Cereno. The failure of both slaves and slave owners to meet up the moral standard reveals Melville's plaint for the weakness of human nature.

Not only does Melville reveal the evil of human nature, but also his critical viewpoint of the white people's "benign" racism and racial superiority. Moreover, Melville gives a comprehensive preview for the complicated racism in United States for the next two hundred years in the novella by

foreshadowing the occurrence of violence on slaves and slave revolts in 1800s.