

The ways in which
any two writers deal
with the historical
realities of slavery e...



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Slavery was first brought to the Southern United States in 1619, with the invention of the Cotton Gin in 1793 there was a huge demand for slaves from many countries including the Caribbean and Africa to work on plantations. At its peak roughly forty percent of the Southern population were slaves and it was not unknown to have a fifty percent mortality rate during the journey to 'The New World'. According to American laws at the time slaves were treated as property by their owners and could be bought and sold as easily and carelessly as livestock.

Slaves were sometimes allowed to marry and marriage was often imposed on them, this was not recognised by the state, however, and slave owners were free to split up couples and families as they pleased simply by selling them on to new owners. Children born into slavery were raised until they were Twelve at which time they were sent to the fields to work from sunup to sundown; this would continue until they died or were set free. Slaves were treated badly, beatings, rape and murder were not uncommon but unlike free Americans they had few rights and little to no access to education, healthcare or justice.

During this period in history there was a great deal of literature written about slavery, some pro slavery and some anti. Many fought for years to abolish slavery in the Southern states and it was the succession of the Civil war and Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863 that finally put and end to legal slave holding and trading. This did not mean the end of slavery and plantation owners still used slaves, black people were not accepted into society and illegal slavery went on for many years.

Herman Melville was a prolific writer who wrote about his voyages at sea; he spent a large part of his early life at sea, visiting strange lands and even living amongst natives. He became known later in his career as, 'The man who lived among the cannibals'. 'Benito Cereno' is a short story written by Melville that was included with his other works in 'The Piazza Tales'. The narrative gives an account of a Spanish ship transporting slaves; the slaves revolt and take over the ship killing most of the crew and the passengers.

The captain of The Batchelor's Delight, Captain Delano sees the ship is in danger and offers to help; he boards the slave ship and spends the day observing the strange behaviour of the crew. Captain Delano realises that the slaves have revolted and has his own men overpower them and take control of the ship again. The major theme of the story is good vs. evil, the good being the good-natured Captain Delano and his crew against the murderous black slaves.

Captain Delano who offers aid to the struggling ship is the personification of integrity and inherent goodness and the slaves who seize the San Dominick are depicted as evil cold blooded murderers, they torture and murder Alexandro Arander before barbarically displaying his bones on the bowsprit. The story would appear to be a pro-slavery novel describing and revealing the nature of the 'untamed black race', but on reading further it becomes clear that Melville is not criticising the 'foreigners' but is commenting on the culture of the white man.

Much of the plot centres on the destructive power of evil. The question is why do the slaves revolt? They are not after money, ransom or treasure they

are fighting for freedom. The actions that are recounted in the declaration at the end are of a hideous nature; they kill for the sake of killing and it is seen that some of the slaves commit random acts of violence on the Spaniards held captive. Babo is the ringleader of the revolt and he constantly threatens Benito Cereno who is in continuous fear, by the time Captain Delano finds him he is a nervous wreck.

The slaves use excessive violence, they hack crewmembers to death with hatchets and Melville describes these scenes in gory detail; recounting the death of Alexandro, Cereno says, ' Yet half alive and mangled, they dragged him on deck'. This can only suggest some form of mutilation or heinous violation of another human being. The slaves are not the only source of wickedness in the story and this is what Melville so subtly expresses.

The cause of the atrocities was in fact the behaviour of the white man, the enslavement of fellow human beings and the slaves express this with there slogan written in Latin on the shroud that hangs from the front of the ship, ' Follow your Leader'; this statement is filled with irony for it is exactly what the slaves are doing. Following the example of what the white man has done to them, violence begets violence. The question is what is Melville really saying?

A simplistic answer could be that two wrongs make a right and that by getting revenge on the white slave holders is reasonable considering the way in which slaves were treated. In this case Babo can be seen as the hero, on a par with Nat Turner who lead a bloody revolt in the South killing sixty white people including his owner and his family in 1831; it doesn't matter who or

how many are slain as long as it is in the name of freedom. The problem with this theory is the one sidedness of the story, we are not told of the treatment of the slaves by the white man.

All we see of the white man is in the characters of Benito Cereno who hardly speaks until the end and the benevolent Captain Delano. We see Delano offer assistance and chide himself when he even suspects that there is something amiss on the San Dominick, this goodness in him makes him blind to the plight of the Spaniards on board and Babo and his men easily fool him because of his innocence; in Delano's narrow mind he cannot conceive of anyone but the white man capable of such an act thus showing his true misunderstanding and underestimation of anyone other than his own people.

Delano has been indoctrinated with the view that the black man is, ' a kind of Newfoundland dog', subhuman in intelligence but amiable and docile just like Babo the ' faithful slave and servant'. This stereotype is recognised by Babo and he uses it to his advantage to attentively wait on and secretly watch over his supposed master. This is the true message of Melville; from being at first superficially pro-slavery the story shows itself to be anti-slavery and also a satire on American authority.

It would appear that Melville thinks that Americans are taught to think in this way to have regulated ideas and values and to be governed by the pride of their nation and to identify with a racist and social-class orientated attitude. Delano's racist stereotypes prevent him from recognising the revolt, and it is only when he is presented with tangible evidence in the form of Cereno leaping into Delano's boat and then being pursued by Babo wielding a knife,

that Delano realises the situation. The phrase 'Follow your Leader' really takes meaning when the crew of 'The San Dominick' are subdued by the crew of 'The Batchelor's delight'.

Melville states that rebellion will follow slavery and in turn violence will follow rebellion in order to quell it and so on; thus suggesting that a nation who has been taught to think in such terms will never change its way unless they are taught otherwise. The story is not a criticism of Slavery for Melville was not openly or explicitly apposed to slavery, but he was sympathetic to the people who fought against it and their mission to abolish slavery during the Civil War. The narrative points out the stupidity of the ideas of prejudiced people, it is a subtle warning of what will happen when human freedom and equality is threatened.

Melville points out that slavery has no positive outcomes and only breeds inhumanity and malevolence in men. Where 'Benito Cereno' works with highly symbolic terms, 'The adventures of Huckleberry Finn' appears straightforward and simplistic when it comes to interpretation. 'Huck Finn' is a story of a young lower class boy who escapes the beatings of his drunken father and sets off on an adventure with Jim, an escaped slave. 'Huck Finn' could be seen as an adventure book and was read so by many children, it is only when one understands the issues involved that you can read between the lines and see a deeper meaning.

Twain wrote the book two decades after the Emancipation proclamation and after the civil war but America was still struggling with the Southern states; 'Reconstruction' was meant to help black people integrate themselves into

society but was faltering only a few years after it was introduced. It can be read as an anti slavery novel, we see cruel racism in 'Pap' as he expresses his feelings on how a black man had the vote, 'They told me there was a state in this country where they'd let a nigger vote, I drew out.

I says I'll never vote again', many thought that because Twain used such words as 'nigger' he was encouraging racism. The most prominent part of the story is Huck's struggle with what he has been told is right and what he feels is right in his heart. The widow Douglass had subjected Huck to schooling but he has not yet been indoctrinated with the values and attitudes that Melville spoke of. This freedom of thought makes Huck dubious but curious and open to learn. As the two make their way upriver to the free states Huck battles with the morality of Jim's plight, he begins to question what society has taught him.

As Huck finds Jim on the island we see that Huck has been taught to see black men in the way everyone else did at the time, he says, 'People would call me a low down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum', Huck has been taught that the abolitionists were doing something wrong but he doesn't seem to understand why. He also calls Jim a 'nigger' and can't believe the way Jim is so freely talking about his plans after he has escaped. Huck recalls an old saying, 'give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell. Again Huck is repeating something he once heard but has never experienced a situation where it is true until now. It is only when the pair run into difficulty and Huck has to make challenging decisions. When Huck runs into slave hunters on the river he is set on telling on Jim and reasons with himself that it's the only thing to do; as the men ask Huck if Jim is black or white

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Huck cannot answer, he wants to say but finds himself unable to tell on the man who moments before called Huck, 'the only white man who kept his promise to Jim'.

Huck ends up saying that the man on the boat is his father and he has small pox, the men quickly leave and Jim is safe. Huck then struggles with the morality of what he has just done, on the one hand he feels guilty for not giving Jim up but on the other he questions how he would feel if he had told the men of Jim. Twain, to an extent, believed in the values of the Transcendentalists and the philosophical belief that every human has fundamental goodness in them; Huck finds himself battling between what is morally right and what is instinctively right.

Twain is saying here that what is morally right by society is not necessarily right at all and Huck finds that what he superficially deems as wrong was actually honourably just. This idea echoes Melville's ideas of society being taught to think in certain ways so as to justify and perpetuate ideals that suit that society. It is not only in Huck's moral battle that Twain reveals his opinion, Twain criticises the hypocrisy of society by drawing a parallel between Huck and Jim.

At the beginning of the novel we see the Judge allow Pap to take custody of Huck because the judge gives precedent to Pap's rights over Huck's well being. Pap is an alcoholic who is clearly unfit to look after his son and this decision puts Huck's welfare and safety at risk but because he is by law a minor Pap has the 'right' to do this. This flawed logic comments on the system that allows the white man to own the black man as property, putting

their welfare and safety not only at risk but disregarding their basic rights all together.

By doing this Twain shows that it is impossible for a society that owns slaves to be just; no matter how civilised they are. Although Huck encounters characters that are good they still own slaves. In Sherbern's speech to the mob he says to the crowd that people as a group think they are brave and they will 'tar and feather poor friendless cast out women' but would never have the courage to do the same to a man unless they were masked and their individual identity not known.

Twain, through Sherbern, highlights the illogical and selfish nature of man who would rather stay out of trouble and leave terrible crimes unpunished in fear of the repercussions. Many people see Huckleberry Finn as a racist book that has no place in classrooms or on bookshelves, it is said to perpetuate slave stereotypes and is offensive to black people. Earnest Hemingway said of Huckleberry Finn that it was the source of all American literature and not without good reason.

It is said of some that using the word 'nigger' has too many darker connotations that overshadow the deeper meaning and hinder the enjoyment of the book; seeing as the story was set twenty years before the Civil War it would be not uncommon to hear the word nigger to say the least and Twain uses this so freely to emphasise the fact that this word and many worse were freely used at the time this adds to the realism that Twain successfully manages to create. In the scene where the steamboat explodes and Aunt Sally asks if anyone was killed the answer is, 'No'm killed a nigger.

Twain is using this ironically to highlight the truth about the South at the time and the views people held of black people. Jim's character has come under harsh criticism he is a black slave who flees from being sold to a horrible plantation owner. Jim is described as childlike, illiterate and overly superstitious. It is important, yet should go without saying, that the reader must separate the views of the characters and the views of the author; it is also important to realise the sad fact that many black slaves were like Jim, they were constantly mistreated with no access to education and had no freedom of thought.

Twain is portraying through Jim the historical reality of many slaves. Jim's character is a slave stereotype and has been criticised for being so, but he is a representation of many slaves of the time. However Twain also shows that a black man is no different to a white man and he does this by showing Jim to be a caring figure who develops a paternal relationship with Huck. In chapter fifteen we see Jim become very worried and scared at the loss of Huck, Twain points out that there is a connection between Huck and Jim that does not exist between man and his property.

At the end of the novel Tom Sawyer reveals that Jim was a free man all along and that he was going to pay Jim for his troubles. This underlines the indifference at which people saw the plight of Black people and how Tom saw Jim as mere sport, what's more is that no one seems to see what Tom had done as bad, no one appeared to care for Jim's trouble. The novel does not come to a close and Twain leaves it so there could easily be another story to write about Huck and Tom and their adventures with the 'Injuns'. By doing this Twain again comments on American society.

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Huck's great experience should have taught him much but he doesn't seem to take heed of this lesson and goes off on another adventure without developing or changing as a character. Twain reiterates that unless there is a fundamental change in societies values then it will never change and will never learn from its mistakes and experiences. Both writers don't explicitly write about slavery like other writers of the time, Frederick Douglass for example wrote a poignant biography of his life and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote ' Uncle Toms Cabin' which caused tremendous controversy when it was published.

Twain and Melville wrote more subtle accounts of slavery in America and unlike the other aforementioned they wrote stories that were popular with a wide ranging audience because they were ambiguous and the message that they were trying to get across was hidden. Twain and Melville weren't openly apposed to slavery and it could be said that there stories were written so as not to make a stand against the institution of slavery but to comment on society and how there is something fundamentally wrong with the ' New World's' philosophy.