Slavery – Benito Cereno And Douglass?s Narrative Essay, Research Paper

When inquiring about the comparisons and contrasts between Melville?s Benito Cereno and Frederick Douglass?s Narrative of the Life of an American Slave, Written by Himself, the following question almost inevitably arises: Can a work of fiction and an autobiography be compared at all? Indeed, the structure of the two stories differs greatly. Whereas Douglass?s Narrative adapts a typical pattern of autobiographies, i.e. a chronological order of birth, childhood memories, events that helped shape the narrator etc., Benito Cereno is based on a peculiar three-layered foundation of a central story recounting the main events, a deposition delineating the events prior to the first part, and an ending.

There are other contrasting aspects of the stories that call for attention. Most significantly Benito Cereno ? ultimately ? portrays slaves as evil and Babo as the mind behind the cunning plan that deceives Captain Delano. The reason for this one-sided representation is naturally the fact that we experience the story from Delano?s point of view. In the beginning, we perceive Babo as the typical docile, helpful, and faithful servant so often portrayed in other slave characters such as Stowe?s Uncle Tom and Jim in Twain?s Huckleberry Finn. Babo is more than just a slave; he is a ?faithful fellow?, ?a friend that cannot be called slave? . And despite all the underlying hints of a slave insurrection, Delano does not grasp their meaning. Examples are the slaves? treatment of the Spanish sailors and the hatchet polishers , but in Delano?s narrow-minded world, only the white man is capable of conceiving plans of ?evil?. And when he ? and the reader too ? finally sees ?the mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt?, he is embarrassed and ?with infinite pity he [withdraws] his hold from Don Benito? . From this moment on, Babo is a malign devil and Melville removes speech from Babo?s mouth. This strengthen our opinion of Babo as ?evil? even more, for how can we sympathise with him without hearing his version of the story? Apparently, Melville proposes no other alternative for the reader than to sympathise with the white slave owner Don Benito, whom Babo so ingeniously deceives.

This is fundamentally different in Douglass?s narrative. It is written in the first person singular and offers the reader a very subjective angle. The result is a deep felt sympathy for Douglass?s situation. When he writes, ?Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit ? the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!? , the suffering of the slave Frederick Douglass becomes real; something we can grasp, feel, and almost touch. Mr. Covey is the worst example but all slave owners are portrayed as uncongenial oppressors of freedom. Even Master Hugh in Baltimore, who is compassionate and bestows Douglass with as much freedom as possible, is criticised by Douglass . This is significantly different from Benito Cereno. Here the slave owner is portrayed as the puppet of the slaves ? a highly unusual approach ? and even though Babo is free in some sense, he is still dependent on Don Benito on his road to freedom. Just as the scenery enshrouding the San Dominick is unclear and grey, so is the question of who the slave really is. The text also suggests this ambiguity, for example when it is described how Don Benito?s falling stature is supported by Babo , or the way Babo has control over the conversation with Delano . In Douglass?s Narrative there is no doubt about the relation between slave and slave owner, although Douglass, after the fight with Mr. Covey, resolves that ?the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact?, he still ?remained a slave in form? . Where Benito Cereno works with highly symbolic terms, Douglass?s Narrative is straightforward and plain when it comes to interpretation . Jonathan Arac argues that ?Douglass?s goal ? was much less to recover the language and experience of slavery than to end them.? Perhaps Douglass?s Narrative was not a literate masterpiece, but it was a gust of fresh air for abolitionists and an example for his brethren.

Douglass?s fight with Mr. Covey is the turning point in Douglass?s career as a slave, and in the aforementioned passage lies also the key to understanding the connection between the Narrative and Benito Cereno. ?Give me liberty or give me death?, Patrick Henry said , and it may well be stated that this became Douglass?s mantra. In the 1855 revision of his Narrative Douglass changed the above-mentioned passage. It ends with this:

I had reached the point where I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in form. When a slave cannot be flogged he is more than half free. While slaves prefer their lives, with flogging, to instant death, they will always find Christians enough ? to accommodate that preference.

Martyrdom. That could very well have been the outcome of Douglass?s resolution. And indeed Babo became one. In an allegorical sense, the uprising of the slaves on board San Dominick equals Douglass?s struggle with Covey. Babo inhales freedom, and though he is a slave in form when Delano boards the ship, he is never a slave in fact. With this in mind, Babo?s reckless jump for freedom into Delano?s boat makes sense; he prefers instant death to life in the chains of slavery. It seems justifiable then that if Benito Cereno had been written from Babo?s point of view, the same passage might have occurred.

So Babo is sacrificed on the altar of martyrdom and Douglass gains his freedom. Apparently, this is as contrasting as can be but again, in an allegorical sense, there is a similarity. For although Babo suffers a literary death, he is the one with the last laugh. Don Benito enters a monastery and dies shortly after as a weakened and beaten man, while Babo?s ?head [on a spear] ? meets, unabashed, the gaze of the whites?.

Slave rebellions are the common topic of the two stories. Melville plays with the anxiety whites had of such and Douglass of its possibility to elevate slaves out of their misery. If paraphrased, the end of chapter X in Douglass?s Narrative serves as a perfect illustration of this: Douglass describes his Master Hugh seizing the money Douglass had earned; ?not because he [Hugh] earned it, – not because he had any hand in earning it ? but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up.? Exchange ?money? with ?liberty? and Babo?s right to revolution as that ?of the grim-visaged pirate upon the high seas?, becomes as right as the white man?s enslavement of blacks. In understanding this, Babo turns into a true hero ? albeit a literate one ? on a level with Nat Turner, Madison Washington and others. His quest for freedom and his struggle to achieve it deserves to be remembered, just as Douglass is remembered today.

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