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Midterm 1
10/2/2013

Question 1

Easily the most polarizing societal issue of the 19th century in America was the struggle between slavery and freedom. Now, after a century and a half of post-slavery America, it is hard to even imagine a world in which a person could own another without consequence, but from before the Revolutionary War all the way through the Civil War, it was a common and publicly accepted practice to subjugate non-whites. The issue of slavery is brought to life through the works of Daniel Defoe, Jane Austen, and Herman Melville, writers of *Moll Flanders*, *Persuasion*, and *Benito Cereno*, respectively. All three stories deal either directly or indirectly with the issues of slave ownership, trading, and labor, and each takes the argument for or against slavery to a different magnitude.

Of the three stories listed, *Benito Cereno* most directly concerns the culture of slavery; *Persuasion* and *Moll Flanders*, on the other hand, take a more indirect stab at the problem. It is through the character of Mrs. Smith that we encounter the issue of slavery in *Persuasion*; through an incredible run of poor luck, she loses her husband, her health, and her rights to an estate in the West Indies, almost certainly a slave-driven sugar plantation. The issue of slavery is never explicitly mentioned, but one could stretch to the argument that perhaps it is not the most honorable way to come across a fortune. Any reader already knows Sir Walter Elliott's feelings toward those who acquire their fame and wealth through serving in the navy: "The profession has its utility, but I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it" (Austen 59). Perhaps Mrs. Smith's husband was a sailor before he died; that would only strengthen the argument. At any rate, slaves seem inconsequential to those involved in this story, and for that reason it can be said that the central characters are either pro-slavery or indifferent.

On the other hand, after a life of multiple husbands, children, acts of thievery, and outright manipulations, Moll Flanders manages to find a comfortable retirement thanks to the help of slave labor: "Our affair was in a very good posture, we purchased of the proprietors of the colony, as much land for 35 pound, paid in ready money, as would make a sufficient plantation to employ between fifty and sixty servants, and which being well improv'd, would be sufficient to us as long as we could either of us live" (Defoe 325). After getting to know Moll through her adventures, any reader would be quick to point out that her slaves are simply some of the uncountable individuals Moll has managed to take advantage of in her illustrious career. Her quote reveals no additional information about her; rather, it merely strengthens the reader's preconceived notions. Moll is a cold, calculating, emotionless individual (when not waiting on death row in Newgate). If she were to be labeled with respect to slavery, it would likely be a dependent relationship. If slaves were beneficial to her, as they are in her retirement years in the colonies, then she would be labeled as pro-slavery. If she, on the other hand, bet someone 1,000 pounds that slavery would end in the next 20 years, she would be anti-slavery. The argument in this case really rests more on Moll's personality and less on ideology in general.

Despite *Benito Cereno* having a plot completely dependent on the premise of slavery and the Transatlantic slave trade, as a complete novella it manages to establish itself in a relatively ambiguous position relative to the issue of slavery. A reader can argue in multiple directions. Captain Amasa Delano is by no means a particularly shy man, in action or in mind. As his musings

begin to drift toward the possibility of Don Benito having dark designs for his future, he justifies his own thoughts by remarking that "the whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race," adding some moments later that the blacks "were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguin in against it with negroes?" (Melville 65). This quote could be read as an excerpt from the mind of any pro-slavery American and accepted as reasonable, but from the mouth of Captain Delano it carries a bit more ambiguity. Quite simply, the quote does not fit his personality all that well. Through the course of the novella, Captain Delano proves himself as a man of honor and a moderately benevolent soul; certainly not the qualities of someone who endorses a slave trade. Or are they? Benito Cereno takes place in the year 1799, when slavery is simply accepted practice. Delano never explicitly remarks on his feelings toward the practice of slavery; it might be unreasonable to assume the extremes, but he obviously plays along with the notion of whites having the superior intellect and social standing, at least in this instance. In addition, Delano makes an early attempt to bid 50 doubloons for Babo once he notes his value as a servant, an offer which is promptly refused mostly by Babo himself, but also serves as evidence that if he is not explicitly in favor of slavery, Delano is at the very least not opposed to the idea of having a slave himself. More complex still is the relationship between Babo and his "master," Don Benito (or perhaps a better description, Benito and his master Babo). With Delano's introduction on the boat, Don Benito is forced into a relationship with Babo that he surely wants no part of, and it is hard to doubt that he made it out of the harbor of St. Maria with an anti-black mindset. His striking quote near the end of the novel, when he answers Delano's inquiry about what has cast such a shadow upon him with "The negro," raises more questions than the one it answers (Melville 107). An optimistic reader could believe that perhaps Don Benito dreams of another world, one in which the slave trade is not necessary and blacks would not feel the need to come up with schemes to kill, destroy, and generally induce chaos. On the other hand, he could simply be scarred for life, with a permanent association between the color black and the practice of evil. On a broader scale still, the theme of "gray" that persists in *Benito Cereno* starting from the opening page can be applied both to Delano and his new friend. They have certainly dodged the literal tomahawks, but perhaps not all of the metaphorical ones, and the idea of slavery is where their gray uncertainty, mostly Don Benito's, lies.

The three stories discussed all include the concept of slavery, whether to help establish a scene, add characterization, or focus the plot. As ideology progressed through time in the colonies before and after independence, from Moll's indifference to Delano's ambiguity, more and more individuals began to identify and take positions on the issue of slavery, and challenge the established ideas and practices relative to the capitalist activities of the 18th and 19th century Transatlantic.