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21L.702 Studies in Fiction: Rethinking the American Masterpiece
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Research Paper

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The Writing Process

I began by reading articles related to my topic and looking up some of the sources they referenced. As I went through the different references, I copied quotes that seemed relevant to my topic, and I jotted down notes and thoughts that came up as I read. I then looked over my notes and tried to form a cohesive thesis out of everything, and I began writing. I added to my notes as ideas occurred to me as I was writing. When things weren't flowing well, I jumped to a different point that was easier for me to write about, and then added stuff or rearranged paragraphs to try to organize the argument. It was difficult to get started writing, since in the beginning I was kind of far away from my main focus, but once I started writing more specifically about Cassy and Babo, things got a little easier.

From Trickster to Transgressor in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Benito Cereno*

The figure of the trickster plays a large role in defense, survival, and escape in many American slave narratives. The trickster is a cunning, resourceful, adaptable character, able to overcome unequal circumstances through ingenuity and misdirection, and often in comical or humorous ways. Yet in the characters of Cassy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Babo from *Benito Cereno*, the trickster figure takes on a more sinister, threatening aspect. A large part of their power arises from their more disturbing traits, and from their intimacy with the characters they control: Cassy with Simon Legree and Babo with Benito Cereno. It can be understood, however, that while typical trickster actions only serve to undermine certain instances of slavery, the less palatable, more transgressive aspects of Cassy and Babo do more to challenge the concepts and assumptions underlying it.

As many scholars have noted, the archetype for the trickster figure finds sources in African folk tales (Beardslee 48; Kitts 495). These tales were applied to slaves' lives as a way of resisting complete subjugation:

Identifying with the frightened and helpless creatures, so similar in their relations to the larger animals to the relationship of the slave to the master, the slave storytellers showed how the weak could survive. Especially in the Brer Rabbit tales, the hero, whether trickster or braggart, always defeated the larger animals through cunning. (Blassingame 57)

The games the trickster plays undermine his slave condition in practical ways, for instance in confounding a slave trader (Stowe 83-86). Tricks are also a method of resistance and subtle nonconformity to what would be considered the slave's proper place, such as in Topsy's use of mischief to establish wary respect amongst the St. Clare servants and to make a mess of her chores (Stowe 271-272).

But as Ralph Ellison discusses in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," it may be limiting to overemphasize the role of such archetypes. He argues that the trickster is not

unique to the African tradition, for “from a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters and confidence men” (Ellison 101). Ellison does not draw solely from such archetypes and “resists such easy categorization” for his characters (Lee 461). Similarly, it may be worthwhile to consider how characters like Cassy and Babo stretch, challenge, or transform the trickster archetype, and what implications this may have for Stowe’s and Melville’s representations of slavery.

The comparison between Stowe and Melville may not be obvious at first glance. Sarah Robbins argues, however, that because of the culture of *Putnam’s*, in which *Benito Cereno* was published, Melville must certainly have been aware of Stowe’s work and her character types:

That Melville could expect his readers to interpret Delano, Benito Cereno, and Babo at least in part through juxtaposition with Stowe’s by-then-famous characters is clear from *Putnam’s* own measuring of “new books” against the ubiquitous Stowe (and her clones)...the magazine’s readers would have been likely to draw both on knowledge of Stowe’s text itself and on the editors’ parodies of it when reacting to any new 1850s white antislavery narrative. (554-555)

Still, it is difficult to find an immediate comparison for a character like Babo. While Delano echoes many of the racialist attitudes found in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and while Benito Cereno’s situation brings to mind some of Augustine St. Clare’s dire predictions about slave revolt (Stowe 289-290), Babo does not quite have an equal for sinister plotting and bloody violence in any of Stowe’s characters.

This can be attributed to the dramatically different circumstances of the story: one is concerned with slavery in the homes and plantations of America, while the other is about a slave revolt aboard a Spanish ship. It can also be understood, as proposed by Sarah Robbins, in terms of the “gendered” nature of the antislavery narrative. Robbins argues that “Stowe drew on her experience as a motherly teacher to craft an instructive narrative voice and characters whose experiences conveyed direct moral lessons to white middle-class readers” (535). A disturbing

character like Babo would be ill-suited to the moral purposes of Stowe's "domestic didactic social role" (Robbins 537). Melville, on the other hand, has more freedom, within the "aesthetic values" of "a manfully moral American literature," to draw on the unfamiliar and to challenge the reader's comfort (Robbins 547). As Sterling Stuckey explains about the presence of African dance in *Benito Cereno*:

[Melville] carried subtlety beyond the bounds familiar to his readership, a development related to his creation of the novella's governing symbol by fusing models from widely divergent cultural worlds before concealing them deep beneath surface appearances... (51)

Melville does not delineate and instruct the way Stowe does. Because his writing is "aesthetic" rather than "moral," there is less need for explicit instruction and more room for ambiguity.

Still, even within "domestic didactic" literature, Stowe finds ways of including subversive and sometimes disturbing qualities in her characters, particularly in Cassy. There is, for one thing, the similarity between Cassy's and Babo's trickster games. Each reveals her or himself as one of the most (if not the most) intelligent characters in their respective narratives. Babo shrewdly plays on Delano's belief that "the Negro [makes] the most pleasing body servant in the world," and he relies on Delano's assumption that the slaves are "too stupid" to be involved in intrigue to carry his charade through (159; 186). Cassy also plays on Legree's weaknesses—his superstitions specifically—to set up a situation in which she can control him and effect her escape, planting the idea of ghosts in the garret (408-412).

These methods are alike in the fact that they rely upon close, intimate contact with the objects of their control. This is maybe not commonly seen in the predominant trickster archetype. With Topsy's and Sam's antics, the smaller, smarter character gets the better of larger, dumber characters through comical and clever tricks. The light-heartedness of these situations establishes a certain distance between the trickster and his antagonist because the contest isn't personal—rather, it is a sort of abstract game between two opponents.

But when the trickster is allowed into more intimate space, both in the physical and mental sense, with his opponent, the effect is rather unsettling. When Babo mimics the devotion of an affectionate, faithful slave, “less a servant than a devoted companion” (Melville 159), there is something disturbingly unnatural in the whole affair:

To Captain Delano’s imagination, now again not wholly at rest, there was something so hollow in the Spaniard’s manner, with apparently some reciprocal hollowness in the servant’s dusky comment of silence, that the idea flashed across him that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito’s limbs, some juggling play before him. (Melville 199)

The vivid scenes involving master and slave—such as their contrast in dress as they stand side by side, or Babo’s careless use of the Spanish flag, or the drawing of blood as Babo shaves Don Cereno—are arresting in their juxtapositions and incongruities, and are visually violent in their contrasts. This speaks, perhaps, to the violent nature of their mastermind and creator, Babo. These scenes have a peculiar effect on even the oblivious Delano, creating a sense that something is not quite right aboard the *San Dominick*.

There is a sense of uneasiness in Cassy’s character as well. Like Babo, Cassy in many ways is dominant over her master, a situation that arises out of her position of intimacy with him:

The influence of Cassy over [Legree] was of a strange and singular kind. He was her owner, her tyrant and tormentor. ...yet so it is, that the most brutal man cannot live in constant association with a strong female influence, and not be greatly controlled by it. ...as time, and debasing influences, and despair, hardened womanhood within her, and waked the fires of fiercer passions, she had become in a measure his mistress, and he alternately tyrannized over and dreaded her. (Stowe 409-410)

This intimacy, however, also has a corrupting effect, as her “influence had become more harassing and decided, since partial insanity had given a strange, weird, unsettled cast to all her words and language” (Stowe 410). Stowe frequently suggests that Cassy is unstable, with a “half-crazed and wandering mind” (404). This is the result of the abuses Cassy suffers under slavery, and it is also what gives her a degree of power over Legree.

Indeed, it is Cassy and Babo's disquieting qualities—their ingenuity, Cassy's insanity, Babo's ruthlessness—that make them both so compelling. These qualities have unpredictable elements which suggest that Cassy and Babo cannot be completely controlled; these qualities are also closely associated with violence. Babo orchestrates the terror of the slave revolt to a merciless, calculated, and chillingly effective level:

The Negro Babo showed [Cereno] a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship's proper figurehead...the Negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's...said words to this effect: "Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader," pointing to the prow. (Melville 223)

Cassy also displays a similar degree of brutality when she urges Tom to use an axe against Legree in his sleep. Her taste in violence is just as gruesome as the Ashantees', with their "bloody hatchets" aboard the *San Dominick* (Melville 223). Cassy's speech is frenzied and disjointed, revealing her unsettled state of mind:

Come along! He's asleep—sound. I put enough into his brandy to keep him so. I wish I'd had more,—I shouldn't have wanted you. But come, the back door is unlocked; there's an axe there...I'd a done it myself, only my arms are so weak. (Stowe 405)

But in these scenes, neither Babo nor Cassy are the ones performing the acts of violence. Cassy tries to convince Tom to do it for her, since her own "arms are so weak." Babo must also delegate the use of force to other, stronger slaves, for it was his "brain, not body, [that] had schemed and led the revolt" (Melville 234). When Babo attempts to use his own strength in matters, leaping from the *San Dominick* to attack Don Cereno, "his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, ... at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor [Delano]" (Melville 234). Similarly, when Cassy, out of maternal rage, attacks the man who sells her children, she flies upon him, but then "all grows dark, and she didn't know any more,—not for days and days" (378). This is either because she is severely beat back, or because her body cannot sustain her crazed state of mind.

Cassy and Babo only resort to their own acts of violence in spontaneous moments, and these are far less successful than their calculated moments since the two are physically outmatched by others. It is evident that their strengths lie in their ability to influence others, not in their own physical power. Both Cassy and Babo can be seen as having predominantly domestic, or feminine, influence since they both operate through personal, intimate relationships, and since they must use persuasion rather than physical force to achieve their goals.

Cassy's feminine influence is perhaps a counterpart to the many examples of "domestic didactics" in Stowe's novel (Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, and Rachel Halliday, for example). Instead of nurturing, she uses her influence to disrupt Legree's household and his state of mind. There are also similar instances of influence with Mrs. Shelby, who does her best to ensure Eliza's safe escape through numerous seemingly innocent disruptions in her household (Stowe 91). Mrs. Shelby, granted, is not as malicious as Cassy. But there are similar implications. Not only does the woman's position in the household afford her the opportunity for moral instruction, but it provides her also with the power to use her domestic influence in her own and others' defense, if need be. Obviously, Cassy's situation is far from the dominant domestic ideal in Stowe's writing; but Cassy's situation is itself a corruption and perversion of the proper domestic structure, and so her domestic influence is turned to somewhat underhanded purposes.

Despite Cassy's insanity, the overall impression is that her cleverness and manipulation are empowering. The narrator celebrates Cassy's successes and triumphs in Legree's defeat, as does the reader. Cassy's situation is clearly a case of the oppressed gaining victory over the oppressor, much more in line with the trickster archetype seen in other characters. With Babo, however, the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor is far less clear. Though the situation is again an inversion of the expected hierarchy, revealing the power of the slave and the vulnerability of the master, this is because the master-slave relationship is actually a sham, not a

reality. It is through a parody of “filial or fraternal” devotion that Babo is able to control Delano and Cereno, remaining close to Cereno the whole time Delano is aboard the ship (Melville 159). In contrast to Cassy’s situation, Babo is actually the oppressor and Benito Cereno the oppressed. Though both Cassy and Babo act to terrorize their “masters” and to disturb their sanity, readers are far more likely to sympathize with the tormented Cereno than with the despicable Legree, making Babo’s manipulation far more sinister and disturbing.

If *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Benito Cereno* are, as Sarah Robbins suggests, antislavery works, why, then, make Cassy’s character insane and Babo’s character bloodthirsty? Samuel Otter, in his essay “Stowe and race,” discusses the portrayal of blacks in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

‘Romantic’ racialism, I suppose, is preferable to ‘classical’ racism, especially in the context of the vehement racial politics of the 1850s. Stowe’s efforts to elevate her African-American characters to leading roles in the next, more truly Christian phase of history should not be dismissed, given the Negrophobia she sought to counter. These advances come with a cost, though. (20)

This “romantic racialism” refers to the characterization of figures like Tom, who as an African is a natural Christian: gentle, simple, forgiving, and displaying a child-like delight with decoration and bright, beautiful objects. But a character like Cassy, then, who is unpredictable, violent, and in some ways anti-domestic, can be seen as counteracting much of the racialist characterizations in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She certainly does not fit many of the “romantic racialist” assumptions. She “resists such easy categorization,” stretching the portrayal of women in the story and adding elements of rage to the figure of the trickster.

It can be rightly argued that much of the effect of Cassy’s character is diffused by the fact that she is only insane because the extreme traumas of slavery, and as such, her most remarkable characteristics are only the effects of her victimization; also by the fact that, like other distinctly individual and interesting characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Topsy comes to mind), Cassy is in the end subsumed into a happy, domestic, Christian role, implying that this is role she was meant

to fill all along.

Yet it should be understood that this was the rhetorical and melodramatic structure in which Stowe was writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sarah Robbins argues:

Thus, in the *Era* Stowe could use the rhetorical techniques of domestic didactics to enact the white middle-class woman's ideal mission—educating the male reader for enlightened citizenship, the female for guidance of other males. Reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* today, then, we can develop a clearer picture of its gender-inflected role in the early development of the antislavery narrative genre if we keep in mind the *Era*'s affirmations of national-level moral suasion as middle-class white women's responsibility, and writing as a means toward that end. (542)

Stowe's method of "moral suasion" relies upon domestic arguments and operates within assumptions about women's roles and responsibilities. As moral teachers, women were expected to lead through example and nurturing instruction. In this context, Stowe is most persuasive because she makes the stories and suffering of her slave characters accessible and relatable to her middle-class audience. Her characters serve as respectable, admirable examples for others to learn from.

In crafting her slave narratives, then, Stowe chooses to begin in familiar settings and then guides the reader through more difficult situations. Cassy grows up relatively privileged and initially enjoys a happy domestic role as wife (though not legally) and mother. The false sense of security in this tamer version of slavery is revealed when all these happy things are taken away from her. And as the narrator guides the reader through Cassy's struggles, Stowe guides the reader through her moral arguments as well.

In contrast to this, when the real situation aboard the *San Dominick* is revealed in *Benito Cereno*, the truth is unexpected and the effect on the reader is abrupt and jarring:

Now with scales dropped from his eyes, [Delano] saw the Negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but, with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives in ferocious piratical revolt. (Melville 213)

Even with the suspicions present in the first part of the story, the realization of the full extent of

the Babo's terror and control comes as a shock. If, as Robbins suggests, much of the effect of *Benito Cereno* relied upon comparisons with prevalent anti-slavery narratives of the day (554-555), the effect of a character like Babo may be understood in his great contrast with the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

For one, Babo and the other slaves in *Benito Cereno* are African, not American. Babo has never experienced American slavery, and even as the property of Aranda, his experience has been more like an imprisonment than an enslavement—and a relatively free one at that, as none of the slaves were bound or shackled aboard the ship. In many American slave narratives, the point is made that while some slaves are lucky enough to be “partially civilized and Christianized by favorable circumstances,” other “poor creatures [are] brutalized by the lash” (Jacobs 46). Babo has never encountered the systematic oppression, moral corruption, and degradation of institutionalized American slavery and so cannot claim the excuse of these brutalizing influences; wherever his violence arises from, it is not slavery.

In fact, in stark contrast to Cassy and Stowe's other characters, the reader is never shown what Babo's influences and motivations may have been. All one is given to understand of him is that he is trying to return home to Senegal—a detail which surfaces in the dispassionate narration of the deposition, and which is in some ways unexpectedly poignant (Melville 221). Most of what the reader sees of him is an elaborate act, and at the end, when all appearances are thrown off, Babo, “seeing all was over, . . . uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” (Melville 234). Melville, unlike Stowe, does not allow his character a direct, undisguised voice. (Cassy, in fact, is given almost an entire chapter to narrate in “The Quadroon's Story.”) The reader is thereby barred from the sort of identification and sympathy that were Stowe's persuasive tools. Babo retains a level of dignity and pride at the end of the story, but the reader is provided no guidance as to why, and is

instead left with the uncomfortable impression of gruesome violence united with heroism in the image of Babo's "head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the plaza, [meeting], unabashed, the gazes of the whites" (Melville 235).

One might be tempted, in Melville's representation of Babo, to veer towards what Samuel Otter terms "'classical' racism," especially given the brutality and violence of the slaves. This, however, would be overly simplistic, for

Melville offers neither a transcendent critique nor a symptomatic recapitulation of racial beliefs. In his fiction, he insists that this is a false choice and that racial assumptions, presumptions, and investments are not so portable or divestible...Melville both inhabits and manipulates contemporary racial discourse, giving a material sense of its structures and functions. (Otter, "'Race' in *Typee*" 12)

The overall effect of Melville's subtle suggestions of unease aboard the *San Dominick*; of the shocking revelation about Babo's revolt; of how completely Delano is deluded; of the jarring differences in narration, from Delano's obliviousness, to the detachment of the deposition, to the final strange perspective afforded by the last narrator; and, most of all, the mystifying effect of withholding Babo's perspective at the end—all act to disrupt the reader's sense of complacency rather than tempt him into convenient stereotypes.

Out of the many slave characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Benito Cereno*, there are perhaps no characters more inherently unfit slavery than Cassy and Babo. This is not because they fit certain standards or expected modes, but because they disturb one's assumptions and challenge expectations in their unpredictable, threatening, and at times perverting influences. Whether functioning as instances of moral instruction or as aesthetic ambiguities, these characters add complex dimensions to Stowe's and Melville's portrayals of slavery.

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