Annotation

"[…] master told me never mind where he was, or how engaged, always to remind him, to a minute, when shaving-time comes."

Memory and the past can hold great power when you used correctly. They both can be used against someone in order to make them a captive to your will. Or it can be used to hold your captor captive, depending on the way you use it. “We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.” (Smedes, 1984). We see this play on memory and the past and how to use it a lot in some of Melville’s stories; like Bartleby and Benito Cereno. Where the captive turn their memory of their past against their captor (or potential captor), who lacks the advantage of knowing the extent of their captives history.

In the story Benito Cereno, there are a handful of times where the character Babo uses his memory of the past helps him take control over the situation and uses it against Captain Delano. You can see it happening whenever Babo is takes the role as a slave again, instead of being the person that obtained his own freedom along with the other slaves on the ship. Babo shows how much he controls things by always being there and keeping an eye on the conversations that take place between Don Benito and Captain Delano. He interjects when he needs to, in order to keep the ships happenings a secret and he does this all through the role of being a great servant. “Only apparently speaking on Cereno’s behalf, Babo in fact affirms his own self mastery,”
(DeLombard, 2009). If Captain Delano would have paid attention to how much Babo talks without being directly asked, he probably would have noticed how much Babo actually controls the situation.

You can see this pattern of controlling the captor in other works of Melville, especially Bartleby. Where the character the nameless lawyer (the captor) always ask for Bartleby (the captives) history, but Bartleby never tells. That drives the lawyer crazy and does not give the lawyer any advantage over Bartley to control him. The story shows that without memory you are able to recreate your past and be whoever you want to be. For Babo that recreated self would be a free slave, which would have worked if not for the interjection of Captain Delano. Babo can never fully leave his slave self behind because of history of the past and the way the world sees him. “Memory generates narratives it can only authorize through recourse to amnesia; only by forgetting one’s own unfreedom - and that of others.” (DeLombard, 2009).

"You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves."

Memory and the past can be a burden to anyone because of how much your past and others memory of your past can impede on your future. There is a sort of freedom through the use of memory loss or amnesia. “One of the keys to happiness is a bad memory.” (Brown, 1944). Captain Delano, a character in Melville’s Benito Cereno, always wants to forget the past and move on.
In this part, you can directly see Captain Delano’s thought process on the past and how much he is willing to forget and move on from it. This motto of his helped and hurt him throughout this story; it hurt Delano because he would catch on to the subtle hints of weird happenings on the ship and would immediately forget about it afterwards and move on. He seems to be reluctant on giving the past a chance to be seen and thought over, which makes the reader wonder why he does this so often throughout the text. This type of thought process by Captain Delano, brings up the fact that if anyone was to be able to be completely free of anyone or anything you would have to forget the past. Delano passes on this advice because he thinks that’s the only way for Don Benito to get over what happen to him on that ship and his captive life on that ship.

"Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied; "because they are not human."

"But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades."

"With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, Señor," was the foreboding response.

"You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The negro."

Don Benito brings up the fact that he believes that “they have no memory”, which we are brought to believe that the they he is referencings is all African Americans but in actuality he is only speaking of one. “Also when he says “they” he is not specifically talking about the whole african american race, but in the singular form, as in Babo.” (DeLombard, 2009). This is an
interesting take on african americans, especially Babo, because Babo was very successful in using his memory in order to fool Captain Delano for as long as he did. For example, Babo knows he is a slave in the eyes of not only Captain Delano but to the rest of the world, so he would have to act in that role in order to obtain his ultimate goal. Babo does this really well, that is until the end of the story where we see him get caught and punished for his crimes on that ship.

Along with african americans not “having a memory” in this conversation but you also see Captain Delano mention a shadow that Babo placed over Don Benito. This shadow is a representation of feeling captive to someone, especially to someone you never thought you would be. “The involuntary human faculty of memory impedes one’s full liberation from subjection to another by casting a shadow.” (DeLombard, 2009). This “shadow” caused someone who was completely free trade places with someone who has never been free; and it caused a sense of dread that would stick with Benito for the rest of his life.
Work Cited


DeLombard, Jeannine Marie. "Salvaging Legal Personhood: Melville's Benito Cereno."

