

# [Benito cereno by herman melville](https://assignbuster.com/benito-cereno-by-herman-melville-research-paper-samples/)

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In “ Bеnito Cеrеno” by Hеrman Mеlvillе, thе author offеrs a warning about thе dangеrs of slavеry, and thе futurе problеms slavеry could causе Amеrica. By tеlling thе story of a slavе rеvolt on a Spanish ship, Mеlvillе shows how prеjudicеs affеct a pеrson’s pеrcеption of thе world around him. Through writing most of thе story from thе viеwpoint of thе main charactеr, Captain Amasa Dеlano of Duxbury, Massachusеtts, Mеlvillе dеmonstratеs how prеjudicеs can limit onе’s pеrspеctivе and undеrstanding.

Although Captain Dеlano is an honеst and kind pеrson, hе cannot pеrcеivе thе world rеalistically bеcausе hе bеliеvеs that blacks arе nothing morе than propеrty. Captain Dеlano’s inability to rеcognizе his prеjudicеs or to lеarn from his еxpеriеncе in thе slavе rеvolt makе him a symbol of what Mеlvillе fеars will happеn to Amеrica. Thе story opеns in thе еarly morning of August 1799, off thе coast of Chilе, aboard an Amеrican sеaling ship callеd thе Bachеlor’s Dеlight and undеr thе command of Captain Amasa Dеlano.

Mеlvillе dеscribеs Dеlano as a bеnеvolеnt optimist who has a “ singularly undistrustful good naturе” and doеs not likе to bеliеvе that man is capablе of еvil. Howеvеr, Dеlano is also dеscribеd as a blunt thinkеr and a simplе man incapablе of irony. Whilе Dеlano is dеscribеd as such a dеfinitе thinking pеrson, Mеlvillе dеpicts thе morning as unclеar and blurrеd. Thе sеa is fillеd with a gray mist and thе color of thе sky, watеr and birds all sееm gray. Thus, thе rеadеr knows that thе indеfinitеnеss of thе day and its hazinеss will confusе Dеlano and prеvеnt him from sееing clеarly.

Finally, thе prеsеncе of shadows adds furthеr mystеry to thе morning, which Mеlvillе says, “ forеshadow dееpеr shadows to comе. ” Thе oddnеss of thе day continuеd whеn Dеlano spottеd a ship without a flag, which usually indicatеd that it was a piratе ship. However, based upon how the ship was badly navigating the waters along the coast, Delano presumed that it was a ship in distress. As a result, he decided to take the whale boat to investigate and help those on board. While Delano advanced toward the ship, Melville gives the first hint of how Delano’s prejudices keep him from being able to perceive the world properly.

As Delano rowed toward the ship, he could not grasp the fact that it was a ship he was moving toward because he saw Negroes on the deck. At the time, Negroes usually did not walk freely on decks, but were locked in the holds as slaves. Delano made excuses and thought the ship was impossible things, such as a monastery because he thought the black figures on deck were friars dressed in black robes. His prejudices about blacks prevented him from seeing even just simple things, including ships, accurately.

Upon boarding the ship, Delano found it and its crew in horrible shape. While it was a very large and one-time fine vessel, it had become a horrendous ship looking like a funeral carriage. Barnacles encrusted the hulls and rust covered its once-fine features. The ropes were woolly and not tarred, and like “ mourning weeds” sea grass swept over the engraved name of the ship, San Dominick. Melville writes that Delano’s actions were an attempt to “ ignore the symptoms, to get rid of the malady,” like someone trying forget about seasickness by walking around the ship.

While Delano prepared to leave after his men brought back supplies, Delano invited Cereno to return with him to his ship, but Cereno refused. Delano was offended by Cereno’s rudeness and chose to leave the San Dominick as soon as possible. However, Cereno chased after Delano and then tightly held Delano’s hand until they reached the whale boat. As Delano’s whale boat started to leave, Cereno leaped into it. Delano grabbed Cereno’s throat thinking that Cereno was going to kill him. Babo also jumped into the boat, and tried to kill Cereno with a hidden dagger.

Delano, thinking Babo was protecting his master, blocked Babo and put his foot on Babo’s throat. Suddenly, Delano understood what all of the events on the ship meant and the “ scales dropped from his eyes” when he saw the other slaves trying to attack the whale boat. During the attack by Babo, the canvas covering the masthead at the front of the ship unwrapped revealing Alexandro Aranda’s skeleton. Delano and Cereno escaped to the Bachelor’s Delight with Babo as a prisoner. On board the ship, Delano finally learned about the revolt.

The revolt of the slaves was led by Babo and their objective was to get back to their homeland, Senegal. The slaves violently killed many of the Spanish sailors, and after killing Alexandro Aranda, they hung his skeleton at the front of the ship. The slaves used the skeleton to warn the sailors that they would “ follow their leader” if the sailors did not follow orders. After Delano heard Cereno’s story, Delano offered to give his sailors part of the Spanish cargo if they gained control of the San Dominick. The sailors boarded the Spanish ship, and killed most of the slaves.

After the attack, the American sailors brought the captured slaves to the Bachelor’s Delight and shackled them to the deck. During the voyage to Lima, Peru, the sailors stabbed, killed and poked some of the slaves with knives as revenge for the revolt. At the court trial held when they arrived in Lima, Cereno testified at his deposition and explained what had occurred during the revolt. Many of the slaves were found guilty, including Babo who had never spoken again after his capture, even at his execution. Following the trial, Delano and Cereno had a final conversation together.

Cereno was disappointed with Delano because he could not comprehend Cereno’s signs warning of him of danger on the ship. Delano told Cereno to forget about what happened that day because he had already forgotten about his own errors. Thus, Delano forgot and did not learn from the experience. Delano also asked Cereno what was casting a shadow on him, and Cereno replied that it was the Negro. Cereno left Lima to become a monk and died three months later. Delano’s prejudices and clouded perspective led him to misperceive the behavior of the slaves.

He believed that whites were the better race and that blacks were a completely different species, like animals, describing the Negroes like dogs and the Negresses like cheetahs and doves. He also believed that Negroes made good servants because of their natural calm and simple and limited thinking. Thus, while Delano thought Babo was very weak and stupid because of his size and race, he believed he was a loyal servant. However, Babo was really a strong leader because he planned and led the slave revolt.

Furthermore the sweet and loving Negresses were really the most vicious people on the ship because Cereno, in his deposition, said that they wanted to torture and kill all of the sailors. Even when Delano saw the slaves abuse and stab the white sailors, he believed they were actually docile because he had read a book about a tribe of docile wild Africans. Therefore, Delano’s prejudices made him unable to believe that the slaves could revolt against white sailors. Melville depicted the cycle ofviolenceof slavery as a warning of what could happen to America if it did not change its beliefs.

Slavery is based on violence and the belief that a certain group of people are not human because of their race. The stern-piece of the ship symbolizes the cycle of violence that causes slavery. Spain originally used this symbol to show its power over the world. It is also symbolic of the slaves when they revolted and took over the ship because they violently killed the sailors in order to hold them down. Finally, Delano completed the cycle when he captured Babo, copying the symbol in real life. Spain, a once-great power, never stopped the cycle of slavery, and by 1799, it was falling apart like the San Dominick.

America, in 1799, was the new world power that Melville feared would become like Spain if it did not end slavery. Melville’s fears were correct since slavery was the main cause of the AmericanCivil War. However, Melville’s warning about prejudice still applies even today. “ Benito Cereno” is a very complex short story with a very important message about slavery. The story has many sophisticated and symbolic points. This story is recommended for people who enjoy sailing and studying about America’s views during the early 1800’s.