

# Benito cereno by herman melville

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In "Benito Cereno" by Herman Melville, the author offers a warning about the dangers of slavery, and the future problems slavery could cause America. By telling the story of a slave revolt on a Spanish ship, Melville shows how prejudices affect a person's perception of the world around him. Through writing most of the story from the viewpoint of the main character, Captain Amasa Delano of Duxbury, Massachusetts, Melville demonstrates how prejudices can limit one's perspective and understanding.

Although Captain Delano is an honest and kind person, he cannot perceive the world realistically because he believes that blacks are nothing more than property. Captain Delano's inability to recognize his prejudices or to learn from his experience in the slave revolt make him a symbol of what Melville fears will happen to America. The story opens in the early morning of August 1799, off the coast of Chile, aboard an American sealing ship called the Bachelor's Delight and under the command of Captain Amasa Delano.

Melville describes Delano as a benevolent optimist who has a "singularly undistrustful good nature" and does not like to believe that man is capable of evil. However, Delano is also described as a blunt thinker and a simple man incapable of irony. While Delano is described as such a definite thinking person, Melville depicts the morning as unclear and blurred. The sea is filled with a gray mist and the color of the sky, water and birds all seem gray. Thus, the reader knows that the indefiniteness of the day and its haziness will confuse Delano and prevent him from seeing clearly.

Finally, the presence of shadows adds further mystery to the morning, which Melville says, "foreshadow deeper shadows to come." The oddness of the

day continued when Delano spotted a ship without a flag, which usually indicated that it was a pirate 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 of violence of 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 American Civil 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.