

Slavery and racism argumentative essay

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



First published in Putnam's Monthly in 1855, Benito Cereno becomes one of Herman Melville's most famous works. It has resemblances with Amasa Delano's Narrative of Voyages and Travels, for which it was inspired (Delbanco, 2005). Many critics suggest that it is an allusion to the slave rebellion in 1799 on Santo Domingo island, and some regard it as an allegory of good and evil (Newman, 1986). Finally, some experts see it as a criticism of racism. Melville was initially accused of stereotyping and racism because of his character depictions (Newman, 1986). However, it is not necessarily true that he espouses such attitude.

The narrative is mostly from the perspective and opinions of Captain Delano, but he has limited perceptiveness. Throughout the story, his initial judgments are being disproved. Essential is the understanding that Benito Cereno was written at a time when the United States is on the brink of Civil War (Delbanco, 2005). During that time, blacks are viewed in a condescending and inferior position, similar to Captain Delano's views (Newman, 1986). Moreover, people know the cruelty of slavery. Thus, the tale can be seen as a reproach to this unjust treatment of the blacks.

He showed that blacks also have the right to freedom, depicting how the blacks detest their bondage. After all, isn't freedom America's founding principle? Furthermore, he emphasized the horrific behaviors that may result from slavery. Taken specifically, it describes the condition of the American slave trade. Being a slave ship, San Dominick is symbolical of the gloomy conditions that slaves were put into when they were transported to America (Delbanco, 2005). For the whole of the voyage, their conditions were hardly

taken into consideration, compressing them in a limited space in the hold of the ship that hardly allows them to move.

Such state causes a lot of unnecessary deaths. The most important characters in the story are Benito Cereno, Amasa Delano, and Babo. Benito Cereno is the captain of the San Dominick, a Spanish galleon. He is young and apparently acquired his position through connections rather than experience. Thus, his competency as captain is questionable. As a result, he was not able to foresee that fate of his ship and the upcoming rebellion. Moreover, he lacks strength and power to thwart it when it occurred. His weak character was further highlighted when he was not able to recover from the trauma of the mutiny.

While Delano was on San Dominick, Cereno tried to give him hints of what was really happening in the ship. However, Delano was unable to realize the true situation because of his naiveness and trusting nature. Unlike Cereno, Delano is a good captain who runs his ship in a tight and orderly fashion. On the other hand, Babo is presented as an evil character who plotted the rebellion. He took control after the revolt and ordered the execution of Don Alexandro Aranda and some crew members and passengers. Brilliantly, he orchestrated the plan to deceive Delano and hide from him the current situation in the ship.

However, he is convicted of rebellion and sentenced to a cruel death in the end (McCall, 2002). Although there is the context of good versus evil in the story, blacks should never be seen as the antagonists here. Instead, the real villain here is the ultimate cause of all the violence that happened. Indeed, it is the institution of slavery that caused the slaves to rebel. Thus, the story

shows that the consequence of evil can only be evil as well, resulting to a cycle of chaos. Certainly, the violence that Babo displayed in the story is wrong and far from commendable, but it should be understood where Babo was coming from.

He despised being treated as a slave which led him to kill his captain and to lead a mutiny. For his fellow slaves Babo is a hero, but seen from the eyes of white observers, he is a ruthless man. One may argue that Aranda was a kind slave owner; he even allowed the slaves to stay above deck. However, this is not sufficient for the slaves because freedom is worth far more than that. Furthermore, Delano appeared to like the slaves. Still, he still viewed them from a degrading perspective. His comparisons of the blacks with animals prove this (McCall, 2002).

His shallow admiration for the blacks does not wholly cover his belief that they are an entirely different “ species. ” Melville refutes Delano's opinions about the blacks. The faithful servant, the unjustly chained noble savage, and the caring mothers turned out to be the clever mastermind of the rebellion and its eager participants. Although Aranda and Delano showed a relatively benign treatment and view toward the slaves, this is not enough. There is only a slight difference between the “ kind” attitude and the explicit hatred toward the blacks. However, they are similar on one crucial point—blacks are seen as lesser humans.

Benito Cereno is a tale of struggle for equality and freedom. It is the yearning of the slaves to be free that compelled them to do their violent acts. They wanted to return to lands where they would not be discriminated. It is safe to assume that the writer is against slavery. He displayed understanding of its

implications and the demoralization that it causes. As Delano ironically said, “ Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man! ” However, recognition is not enough; one must take action to stop racism. Up to this time, the society is still haunted by racial inequality.

Whenever confronted with issues of race, it may be useful to go back to the lessons of Benito Cereno and take to heart that prejudice would never result to something good. Worse, it may lead to violence. People must listen to Melville's call to fight discrimination, not just racial but every kind of it.

References Delbanco, A. (2005). *Melville: His world and work*. New York, NY: Knopf. McCall, D. (2002). *Melville's short novels: Authoritative texts, contexts, criticism*. New York, NY: Norton, 2002. Newman, L. B. V. (1986). Benito Cereno. In L. B. V. Newman (Ed.), *A reader's guide to the short stories of Herman Melville*. Boston, MA: G. K. Hall.