

The demise of the
19th century
american liberal:
representations in
"benito ceren..."



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For the abolitionists and intellectual opponents of slavery during the 19th century, fruitless sympathy from the “enlightened” liberals of northern states was simply not enough. In the literary works “Benito Cereno” and *Our Nig*, authors Herman Melville and Harriet E. Wilson argue that sentimental sympathy towards racial injustices does not necessarily translate into social amelioration. In both accounts, Melville and Wilson employ characters with embedded stereotypes to demonstrate how such preconceptions can deter liberals from realizing the complexities of life. Naïve benevolence skewed reality, they claim, and thus was a detriment to the cause. Melville and Wilson both approach the slavery issue as fundamentally wrong—this is a given—however, they are slow to credit liberals solely for “having their heart in the right place.” Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose sentimental novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a deliberate attempt to make readers “feel” the right way about slavery, Melville and Wilson argue that the sentimental liberal response to slavery was as flawed as the system itself. “Benito Cereno” and *Our Nig* are works that attack liberal condescension and pity in order to make a statement that such an approach to the issue of slavery—or any social cause for that matter—was inherently futile. In “Benito Cereno,” the liberal hero Captain Delano is moved by the plight of the San Dominick slave ship, and thus departs his own vessel to provide aid to the gravely malnourished crew. Though Melville repeatedly describes the man as good natured and just, his morally upright intentions never translate into appropriate actions. While aboard the San Dominick, Delano observes a number of occurrences that should lead him to believe that a slave revolt occurred on the ship. His condescending and naïve stereotypes about the Blacks on the ship block him from being critical, as he cannot fathom the

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slaves are the source of the problem. Describing the relationship between Benito Cereno and Babo, Delano says: Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices with that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body-servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiffly superior terms with, but may treat with familiar trust; less a servant than a devoted companion.

(169)Delano's belief that slaves like Babo were content, if not happy, with their predicament severely skewed the reality of the situation. He would later find out that Babo was controlling the weakened Cereno—not to mention threatening his life. But Delano's naiveté never allows him to adequately consider any of his suspicions. Throughout "Benito Cereno," he talks himself out of such theories before looking far enough into the situation to realize its reality.[I]f I could only be certain that, in my uneasiness, my senses did not deceive me, then—Here, passing from one suspicious thing to another, his mind revolved the strange questions put to him concerning his ship.

(190)The paradox of Delano and other enlightened liberals of time was that the very benevolence that he believed might better the lives of others was actually leading him astray from the realities of the world—and hurting the cause of those he tried to help. Wilson presented a similar situation through some of the characters in *Our Nig*. In the book, Miss Marsh, Mr. Belmont, Jack and James are all introduced as liberal heroes in the same vein as Delano. Though these figures were sympathetic to Frado and the cruelties she suffered at the hands of Mary and Mrs. Belmont, their kindness never does any tangible good for the mistreated servant girl. In the following <https://assignbuster.com/the-demise-of-the-19th-century-american-liberal-representations-in-benito-cereno-and-our-nig/>

passage, Mr. Bellmont demonstrates justice and kindness toward Frado, but quickly exits the scene and leaves her at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary. 'How do we know but she has told the truth? I shall not punish her,' he replied, and left the house, as he usually did when a tempest threatened to envelop him. No sooner was he out of sight than Mrs. B. and Mary commenced beating her inhumanly; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room, without any supper. (33-34) The defense of Frado, followed by the subsequent lack of any real-life solution to her problems, forms a recurring pattern throughout *Our Nig*. Wilson argues that the sympathies of northern liberals does nothing to improve the situation of Blacks like Frado, and thus they should reassess their approach to the injustices. Emotional support, she argues, cannot be a credible means of achieving tangible social change. Melville and Wilson both took issue with the liberal sentimentalist approach to social change—and today's social critics might regard many Americans as people of "intent" rather than "action." Social liberals might agree that poverty and AIDS are bad, and that world hunger is a grave issue, however few actually take steps beyond sympathizing with the efforts of others. Historically, social change has only come about when people put their intentions into action—a political trend with roots tracing back to the 19th century.