

# Benito Cereno

Study Guide by Course Hero



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## 👁 Book Basics

### AUTHOR

Herman Melville

### YEAR PUBLISHED

1855

### GENRE

Adventure

### PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

*Benito Cereno* is narrated in the third person, though it adheres closely to the viewpoint of the protagonist, Captain Amasa Delano. *Benito Cereno* is known for being a strong early example of the unreliable narrator because the narration is so bound to Captain Amasa Delano's very limited point of view about the events of the story.

### TENSE

*Benito Cereno* is written primarily in past tense.

### ABOUT THE TITLE

Benito Cereno is the name of the captain of the *San Dominick*. The narrative is centered on the story of Benito Cereno's time as a hostage to mutinied slaves.

## 🕒 In Context

### The American Renaissance

Herman Melville was part of the period of literature known as the American Renaissance, which encompassed writing emerging from American authors from 1830 to 1865 (coinciding with the end of the Civil War). The term was coined in the 20th century by the critic F.O. Matthiessen (1902–50). The American Renaissance is often divided into two extremes of content: optimistic works and pessimistic works. Writers such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and Walt Whitman (1819–92) fall into the optimistic camp, while others such as Melville, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49), and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) are considered to be on the pessimistic end. The work of the pessimistic writers often focuses on themes of doubt, trauma, ambiguous morality, and criminality. Optimistic writers often focused on spirituality, nature, and the creative imagination.

Writers of the American Renaissance were much influenced by the Romantic writers and artists of Europe in the first half of the 19th century. The American Renaissance also marked an interest in American national identity and imaginative expression. Many of the prominent writers of this movement came from a community of wealthy New England literati who were well versed in European literature and art and who worked to create an American version of literature that was

based upon the traditional European canon. Included in this group were writers such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) and Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–94). Another important group of writers during this period are the transcendentalists. These writers, also based in New England, occupied a very different space in the movement from their other New England counterparts. The transcendentalists sought to create a body of literature that did not model itself on its European counterparts but instead built itself on the idea of a national culture that was new and independent from its European origins. The writings of this group—which included Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott (1799–1888, father to writer Louisa May Alcott), and Margaret Fuller (1810–50)—openly advocated for social, religious, and political reforms. They were also outspoken abolitionists. All of the beliefs that were central to Transcendentalism also deeply influenced the writings of this group.

Besides these two major groups of writers, many others played an important role in the development of this period of literature. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96), author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was an extremely influential writer of this period, and though she was not a part of the transcendentalist group, she was an outspoken abolitionist who influenced the abolitionist movement profoundly with her work. Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe were both writers outside the New England circles, with very different beliefs from groups such as the transcendentalists; their work helped characterize this period in American literature. Melville's work is full of adventure that gives his readers a window into nautical life at the time. His works *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* fall in the period from 1850–55, which critic F.O. Matthiessen called an "extraordinarily concentrated moment of literary expression."

## Late 18th- and Early 19th-Century African Slave Trade

Melville's story *Benito Cereno* takes place in 1799 and concerns the transport of slaves between Spain and South America. The transatlantic slave trade was in its final years at this point, having begun in the early 16th century. The African slave trade itself was part of what is referred to as the "triangular trade," in which goods were shipped to Africa from European countries, then slaves were transported from Africa

to the Americas, and finally coffee and sugar were transported from the Americas back to Europe.

While in some cases Europeans ventured into African countries to capture slaves, the majority of Europe preferred to purchase slaves from Africans who had captured and transported them to the coast. People captured and enslaved during tribal wars in various African countries would be brought to the coast on foot, over hundreds of miles, to be sold to European slave traders. Large numbers of people died on that initial journey to the coast, and many more died in the inhumane conditions on slave ships.

By the time Melville wrote *Benito Cereno*, much of the European world, including Spain, had banned slave trading, though not slavery itself. Historically, there were instances in the early 1800s of slaves revolting and taking over their transport ships, and it is likely these instances inspired Melville. However, it is important to note that while the transport of slaves was legal in the time period in which the story is set, it was made illegal by Britain, the United States, and Spain by 1811.

A revolt aboard the *Amistad* in 1839 is one of the most well-known instances of this, wherein 53 illegally purchased African enslaved persons mutinied, killing the captain of the ship. They kept the navigator alive and tried to force him to sail them to Sierra Leone, but the navigator sailed the ship up the coast of North America where it was stopped by the U.S. Navy on Long Island. The case went to trial, and eventually it was ruled that because the slave trade was at this point illegal, the Africans were the victims of kidnapping and were justified in their bid for freedom. The survivors were returned to Sierra Leone.

Another such slave revolt, this one unsuccessful, provided the direct material used by Melville in writing his story *Benito Cereno*. This revolt took place in 1805 aboard a Spanish ship called the *Tryal* and is recounted by the real Captain Amasa Delano (1763–1823) in his memoir *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817).

## South America in the Late 18th Century

By the late 18th century much of South America had been colonized by a combination of Spanish and Portuguese

colonists, who brought with them or imported a large population of enslaved Africans as well. Economically, Latin America as a whole experienced a tremendous period of growth during the 1700s, causing smaller coastal cities like Buenos Aires in Argentina and Caracas in Venezuela to become large and busy urban ports. At this time much of South America was colonized and controlled by the Spanish government, with the exception of Brazil, which was a Portuguese kingdom. By the end of the 18th century, however, all of South America was headed for independence from their original colonial governments. In the first three decades of the following century, all the relative countries of South America would gain their independence from Spain, and Brazil would establish itself as autonomous nation from Portugal in a much less bloody transfer of power.

Slavery was still legal in most of South America in the late 18th century. Latin America, as a whole, imported the most African slaves of all the Americas, causing the region to have the largest population of Africans outside of Africa. In contrast to many other slave nations of the West, Latin America had over a million free black people by the late 1700s. In Melville's *Benito Cereno*, when the mutineers ask Cereno if there are any free black communities they might sail to, the truth is there were probably quite a few in existence that Benito Cereno was simply unaware of.

## Author Biography

### Early Life

Herman Melville was born the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill on August 1, 1819 (an e was added to the family name around 1834). His father was an import merchant in New York City, and his grandfather was involved in the famous Boston Tea Party in 1773—a political protest against British taxation of the American colonies. Melville's father moved the family to Albany in 1830 to work in the fur business, but after two unsuccessful years he died suddenly and left the family with no money. At this point Melville had seven brothers and sisters, and everyone who could work had to leave school to support the family.

Melville was able to return to school in 1835, and then he began working as a teacher to help the family's finances. He

hated the teaching post, though, and returned to Albany to help his brother Gansevoort with the family business. Eventually, Gansevoort also went bankrupt and the family had to move to Lansingburgh, New York (present-day Troy). By this time Melville had begun to try his hand at writing, but the family financial situation was so bad he was forced to focus mainly on finding employment. When Melville was unable to find any permanent work, his brother got him a job as a cabin boy on a merchant ship sailing for England, but no other work came out of the voyage.

### Adventures at Sea

In early 1841, when Melville was 21 years old, he took a job as a crewman on the whaling ship *Acushnet*, which sailed to the Marquesas Islands. The American whaling industry at that time was flourishing. Evidence of the whaling industry was everywhere, and stories of danger encountered by sailors on whaling ships engaged the American imagination. In 1820, when young Melville was just a year old, the whaling vessel *Essex* had been sunk by a sperm whale, and its crew resorted to cannibalism in order to survive until their rescue. Melville was fascinated by this story, which probably played a part in his choice to sign on to the *Acushnet*.

The journey and the month he spent in the islands after deserting the *Acushnet* became the inspiration for his novel *Typee* (1846). Though the book was greatly embellished and fictionalized, it contains some depictions of his actual experiences and observations living among the Tai Pi people. The *Acushnet* is recorded as having arrived in the Marquesas in June of 1842, which is around the time when Melville would have left the ship to live on the island. Ship logs show he registered that August on the Australian whaler the *Lucy Ann*. However, he was quickly involved in a mutiny against the ship's captain in Tahiti. His second book, *Omoo* (1847), was based on his adventures there.

Following the mutiny, Melville did a brief stint as a farm worker in Eimeo, a coastal town in Queensland, Australia, before signing on to work as a harpooner on yet another whaling ship, the *Charles and Henry*. The *Charles and Henry* docked in Maui, Hawaii five months later, and Melville worked in a general store in nearby Honolulu as a clerk and bookkeeper. In 1843 he enlisted in the navy and served for about a year aboard the navy vessel *United States*, which sailed through the Pacific.

## Writing Career and Later Years

Melville's own adventures as well as the stories he heard other sailors tell on his many travels provided characters and real-life detail for his writing, including his novels *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Moby-Dick* (1851), and the novella *Benito Cereno* (1855). *Typee* and *Omoo* brought Melville acclaim and changed his family's financial situation for the better. However, responses to these first two novels were a mix of excitement and outrage, as Melville did not depict colonialism or missionary work in positive lights and often sympathized with the native people of the islands.

Melville saw the decline of his career begin at age 33, with the lukewarm reception of *Moby-Dick*. However, he persevered with his writing through many difficulties, including loss of many of his manuscripts in a fire and the deaths of both of his sons. Melville died in his native New York City on September 28, 1891. While he enjoyed popularity in the 1840s, his career never recovered in his lifetime, and he died in relative obscurity. In the early 20th century, however, many of his works experienced a critical revival and are viewed as classics of the American canon.

## Characters

### Captain Amasa Delano

Captain Amasa Delano, while not the actual narrator of *Benito Cereno*, is the character from whose perspective the story is primarily told. His "good nature" and benevolence are remarked upon throughout the story and are partially what make his perspective so unreliable. His good-naturedness makes him at times naive and gracious when he should be suspicious. He seems to be a competent and experienced captain, as well as generous with his aid and supplies to others. His attitude towards the black people on board the *San Dominick* is relatively benign: he does not actively seem to despise them based on their skin color, but he also adheres to the general mentality of the time and sees them as being a lower race—a shortsightedness that is nearly his undoing.

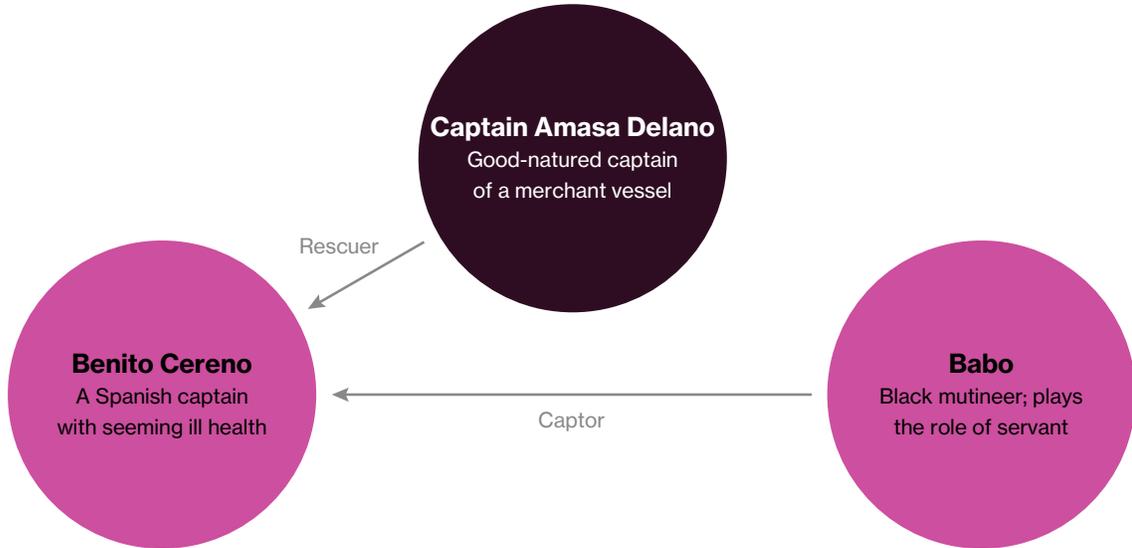
### Benito Cereno

Benito Cereno's character throughout the narrative appears weak and ill of body or mind. It is not clear what type of man he was before he underwent the traumas aboard the *San Dominick*. Captain Delano sees him as someone possibly of unsound mind and notes that his frequent fits leave him shaking and incapacitated. He is described as being "saturnine" (slow and gloomy) and having a "dreary, spiritless look." Underneath all of his nervous fits and what Captain Delano interprets as rudeness, however, is a man traumatized by fear and by what he has seen on his ship. Ultimately, he seems to still possess some strength and presence of mind, as he is able to make the decision to save himself.

### Babo

Babo is a somewhat mysterious character, and what little can be gleaned about him is primarily through the biased observations of Captain Delano or the incriminating deposition given by Benito Cereno. He appears at first to be a loyal and sensitive servant, but it is revealed he is in fact a self-possessed and fierce leader of the other rebel slaves aboard the ship. In Benito Cereno's and Captain Delano's eyes he is a murderous mutineer who caused the death of many Spanish sailors and officers in his bid for freedom. It is certain his fellow mutineers see him in a much more positive light because he is their leader and their hope for freedom.

# Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

## Full Character List

Character	Description
Captain Amasa Delano	Captain Amasa Delano is the good-natured captain of the merchant vessel, <i>Bachelor's Delight</i> . He comes to the aid of the <i>San Dominick</i> when he sees the ship sailing strangely.
Benito Cereno	Benito Cereno is Spanish and the supposed captain aboard the <i>San Dominick</i> . To Captain Delano's eyes he appears sickly and possibly a little mentally unbalanced.
Babo	Babo is a black man who appears to be the loyal servant of Benito Cereno and attends him constantly.
Alexandro Aranda	Alexandro Aranda is the friend of Benito Cereno's who is killed before the story begins. Initially, Benito Cereno tells Captain Delano he died from fever, but his later deposition reveals he was murdered by Babo's orders.
Atufal	Atufal is a coconspirator of Babo's and helps to lead the mutiny. He appears on the deck in chains while Captain Delano is present to help support the idea that Cereno is still in charge of the ship. He is an enigmatic figure in playing the part of being in chains, but he has great size and strength that make him fearsome.
Bartholomew Barlo	Bartholomew Barlo is one of Captain Delano's sailors; he stabs a black man who has been captured and chained up.
Hermenegildo Gandix	Hermenegildo Gandix is the young Spanish sailor who tries unsuccessfully to warn Captain Amasa Delano that all is not as it seems on the <i>San Dominick</i> . At the time he is referred to as "a young Spanish sailor"; Cereno refers to Gandix by name in his deposition.

Martinez Gola	Martinez Gola, a sailor of Captain Delano's vessel, tries to kill a captured black man with a razor.
Don Joaquin	Don Joaquin is a Spanish sailor who is accidentally killed during the American attack on the <i>San Dominick</i> .
Raneds	Raneds is a Spanish sailor and navigator aboard the <i>San Dominick</i> ; he is murdered during the mutiny.

## Plot Summary

### Benito Cereno's Story

Captain Amasa Delano's ship, *Bachelor's Delight*, sits in the bay of the uninhabited island of St. Maria off the coast of Chile, where he has temporarily put down anchor in order to replenish the ship's water supply. While anchored in the bay, Captain Delano catches sight of a ship entering the bay that appears to be having trouble steering and is flying no flag (or, "colors"). Captain Delano, being a good-natured person, worries the ship is in trouble and takes a whaleboat out to see if they need aid or supplies. Upon arrival at the ship, called the *San Dominick*, he is greeted by the captain, Benito Cereno, whose crew strangely seems to be made up of a few Spanish sailors and large numbers of black passengers or sailors. Cereno is attended by his servant Babo, a black man, and seems to Captain Delano's eye strangely prone to melancholy and fits of weakness or illness. Captain Delano asks Cereno what has befallen the ship, and Cereno tells a story of storms, scurvy, and a contagious fever that wiped out a large amount of his crew.

### Growing Suspicion

As they walk around the ship and discuss plans for Captain Delano to aid Cereno, Captain Delano begins to have twinges of apprehension. He sees a black boy gash a white boy's head with a knife and is disturbed that Cereno seems to think nothing of the incident. Captain Delano also notices a Spanish sailor acting strangely and becomes more nervous when

Cereno and Babo move away from Delano and are clearly whispering about him.

## The Boat is Sighted

Deciding to talk to some of the sailors and corroborate Cereno's story, Captain Delano moves about the ship. He oscillates between unease and finding good-natured rational explanations for everything he observes. He feels a sense of relief, however, when his boat returns with water and some food supplies for the ship. Captain Delano helps dole out the water and food and is surprised when Cereno insists on sharing everything equally with the black passengers as well as the white.

## A Fair Wind

Afterwards, Captain Delano follows Cereno and Babo to a cabin on board called a "cuddy," where Babo gives the reluctant Cereno a shave. Captain Delano is confused by the way Cereno shakes in seeming fear as his servant shaves him. Then the three men retire to eat dinner and discuss repayment for sails and other supplies Captain Delano will give the ship. A wind springs up in the right direction, and Captain Delano helps steer the *San Dominick* farther into the bay and near his own ship. He gets into the boat manned by his sailors to return him to his own ship, when Cereno comes out on deck to shake his hand.

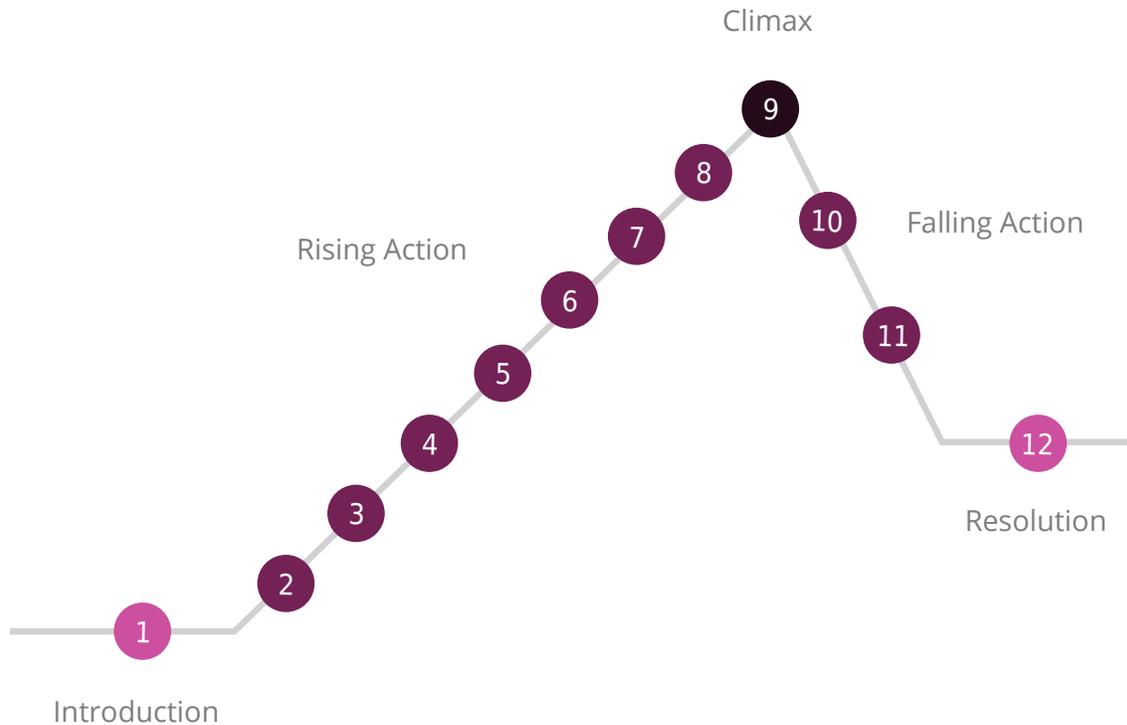
## The Truth Revealed

As soon as Captain Delano is fully in the boat and the boat is on the water, Cereno suddenly leaps into it. While the sailors and Captain Delano struggle with Cereno, many of the black men aboard the *San Dominick* leap into the water to come after the boat. The sailors manage to get clear of all but Babo, who gets into the boat and first attempts to stab Captain Delano, and then Cereno. Babo is captured and restrained. Captain Delano suddenly understands that Cereno had been a prisoner aboard his own ship and that the black people on board had commandeered it. Captain Delano sends a party of boats manned by his sailors to capture the *San Dominick*, which they successfully do.

## The Denouement

The ships then travel together to Lima, where a trial occurs. The final section of the book is primarily in the form of documents detailing Cereno's testimony of what really happened aboard the *San Dominick*. He explains the black people, mostly slaves belonging to his friend Alexandro Aranda, mutinied and killed his friend and many of the other sailors. They used Aranda's skeleton as a figurehead on the ship and demanded Cereno help them sail back to Senegal. They stopped at the bay of St. Maria Island in order to pick up water, and when Captain Delano came aboard, Babo forced Cereno to play a role and tell Captain Delano an elaborate story as their cover. After the trial Babo is hanged and Cereno goes to live in a monastery, where he dies a few months later.

## Plot Diagram



### Introduction

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1. Captain Amasa Delano sights the San Dominick.

### Rising Action

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2. Benito Cereno explains the plight of the ship.
3. Captain Delano's boat returns with supplies.
4. Captain Delano begins to feel suspicious.
5. Babo gives Cereno a shave.
6. Captain Delano helps sail the ship into the cove.
7. Delano gets into his boat to return to his ship.
8. Cereno leaps into Delano's boat.

### Climax

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9. Babo and the other mutineers try to kill Cereno and Delano.

### Falling Action

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10. Delano's sailors take control of the San Dominick.
11. The two ships sail to Lima for trial.

### Resolution

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12. Babo is hanged, and Cereno dies in a monastery.

## Timeline of Events

### A few hours later

Captain Delano takes a boat out to investigate the ship.

### An hour or two later

Cereno and Babo have a whispered conversation, making Delano nervous and suspicious.

### Shortly afterward

Captain Delano watches as Babo shaves Benito Cereno.

### After arrival

Benito Cereno jumps suddenly into Captain Delano's boat as it begins to head back to Delano's ship.

### Upon return to the ship

Delano sends a party of men to take the San Dominick and bring it under their control.

### The morning

Captain Amasa Delano sees an unmarked ship enter the bay.

### Shortly thereafter

Benito Cereno welcomes the captain and tells a tale of the ship's troubles.

### Some hours later

Captain Delano's boat returns and delivers supplies to the San Dominick.

### Immediately after

A fair wind springs up, and Captain Delano is able to help steer the ship into the cove.

### Moments later

Babo attempts to stab Benito Cereno and is captured.

Some weeks later

Benito Cereno gives testimony, and Babo is hanged.

Two days later

Both ships set sail for Lima.

Three months later

Benito Cereno dies in a monastery.

## 🔍 Section Summaries

Melville's *Benito Cereno* does not have chapters. For the purpose of summary and analysis, this guide divides the text into six sections and includes parenthetical descriptions, for each section, based on the novella's plot.

### Section 1 (Benito Cereno's Story)

#### Summary

Captain Amasa Delano has anchored his trading ship in the harbor of a tiny deserted island off the coast of southern Chile, when another ship enters the bay. The ship has no flag raised, as is the tradition for peaceful ships, and yet the Captain Delano still goes out in his small whaling boat to check on the strange ship. Its movements are erratic, and when he approaches he notices it is an old-style Spanish merchant ship called the *San Dominick*, but that it seems in a sad state of neglect. The black members of the crew seem to outnumber the white, a fact that puzzles the captain. Captain Delano tells the sailors who accompanied him to go back to their own ship and retrieve supplies to help out those stranded on the drifting ship; he himself stays onboard. The Spanish captain of the *San Dominick*, Benito Cereno, seems to Captain Delano to be strangely morose and unable to control his crew. Captain Delano witnesses Cereno's close relationship with his servant Babo, and how differently Cereno treats Babo from the contempt or disinterest he shows to everyone else.

Captain Delano asks Cereno what happened to the ship, and Cereno gladly tells him the story. The ship originally set sail from Buenos Aires, headed for Lima in the other side of South America, and was full of all kinds of goods and significantly more crew and passengers. They lost many officers and sailors because of a bad storm near Cape Horn. After the storm many aboard the ship died as a result of scurvy. Because of damage and lack of sailors the ship began to drift until a fever killed all the remaining officers and many of the other people on board. Cereno tells Captain Delano the black people on board may seem disruptive, but that they have actually been a great help.

## Analysis

Much of this first section is given over to Captain Delano's observations of Cereno. He tries to be "charitable" but is in fact extremely bothered by Cereno's lack of interest in his ship or crew, though he notes he is somewhat relieved to realize Cereno's reticence is not directed particularly at himself. Captain Delano immediately sees Cereno's strange behavior as a sign of some madness, describing him as "the involuntary victim of mental disorder."

Aside from the descriptions of Cereno and the ship from Captain Delano's viewpoint, there is also quite a lot of attention paid to the black members of the crew. The narrator describes the people on the ship with the prejudice of the day, seeming both to look down on them and also glorify them, especially in the case of Babo, in a way that is heavily biased and also disregards the fact that the black people on board are, in fact, slaves being transported. The narrator describes them as "unsophisticated Africans," while the Spanish captain is "gentlemanly" and "reserved looking." It appears the black people aboard the ship are not "emigrating," as Captain Delano first observes, but are actually slaves being transported to Lima. Cereno mentions "their owner was quite right in assuring me that no fetters would be needed with his blacks," when explaining to Captain Delano how helpful they have been since the loss of all his officers and many of his sailors. Captain Delano is struck with joy at the relationship between Babo and Cereno and repeatedly refers to Babo as a "servant" and even a "friend," though Babo is clearly one of the slaves being transported. This same combination of derisiveness and idealization characterizes the narrator's descriptions of the native people in Melville's novel *Typee*.

### Section 2 (Growing Suspicion)

#### Summary

Moved by the plight of Benito Cereno and his ship, Captain Amasa Delano offers to lend Cereno three officers to help him get to Lima. Cereno accepts and invites Captain Delano to go up to the poop deck with him. Once there, Captain Delano watches with horror as one boy gashes another with a knife and Cereno shrugs it off as boys sporting. Captain Delano suggests Cereno "keep all [his] blacks employed" and seems

to feel nervous at the white people on the ship being outnumbered by the black. Cereno reveals that many of the black people on the ship are slaves that belonged to his friend Alexandro Aranda, who died of the fever on the ship. A large black man all in chains approaches Cereno, and Cereno asks him if he is ready to beg Cereno's pardon. The man replies that he is not and quietly returns below.

Cereno and Babo step aside and begin to whisper. Captain Delano understands they are in part whispering about him. He sees a young Spanish sailor he had not seen up to then and a room with something glinting in it and begins to feel a little nervous about the whole situation. Captain Delano ruminates about the situation and in the end puts his suspicion away, deciding Cereno is in fact likely a member of the well-known Cereno merchant family. Cereno comes back and begins asking Captain Delano specifics about his cargo, how many men he has on board, and how the ship is armed. Trying to puzzle out Cereno's motives, Captain Delano leaves the poop deck and becomes increasingly apprehensive. He tries to work out if there is some "sinister scheme" afoot. Delano goes in circles trying to make sense of his feelings of foreboding and distrust of Cereno, each time he addresses his fears "good-naturedly" explaining them away again.

## Analysis

Captain Delano continues to try to puzzle out Cereno and his ship, with little result. Delano's self-drawn conclusion about Cereno is he is some sort of middle-class man who did not work his way up to captaincy of the ship but who instead gained it through connections and money. In the narrator's words Delano decides "that the young captain had not got into command at the hawsehole, but the cabin window." The "hawsehole," one of many technical nautical terms used by Melville in this novel, refers to the hole the anchor is pulled up through. It is implied in this quote that Cereno did not become a commander through working his way from the bottom up, but by coming straight into captaincy in some other fashion. Delano draws this conclusion because he can find no other way to explain Cereno's seeming complete lack of command of his subordinates on the ship, his strange low spirits, and his soft unworked hands. There are more ominous explanations that creep into Captain Delano's thoughts, but he repeatedly ignores and explains them away. This foreshadows that Delano's "good naturedness" is potentially a fatal flaw in his personality. While the narrator seems to laud that good

naturedness, Delano's repeated attempts to ignore the "ghostly dread" that comes upon him and the suspicious things he witnesses create an atmosphere of tension and foreboding.

In one of the most suspicious moments of all, Cereno asks specific questions about Delano's crew and cargo, which can seem to have no good motive behind them. In a classic narrative device the scene is interrupted before important information can be imparted or, in this case, before the character has time to have an epiphany about what he has just learned. Captain Delano, for once, does not have time to try to think through or rationalize what he just experienced. If he had, he would probably realize there could be no benevolent reason for Cereno to ask the questions he does about Delano's ship and crew. This moment passes quickly and yet is critical to the development of plot and suspense.

Captain Delano's attitude towards the black people on the ship remains distrustful and shortsighted. Despite his repeated praise of Babo and his admiration for how Babo supports and attends to Benito Cereno, Captain Delano sees him ultimately as nothing more than a devoted slave. He is delighted by Babo's "simplicity" but does not particularly think of him as a man in the same way he regards himself and Cereno. There are a few flashes in which Captain Delano feels uneasy about Babo much in the way he gets twinges of uneasiness about Cereno and the rest of the ship, but, as seems to be consistent with his character, Delano focuses on the good-natured side Babo displays and is able to put aside his feelings of unease and continue in his old prejudices and sense of superiority.

## Section 3 (The Boat is Sighted)

### Summary

Captain Amasa Delano spots his whaling ship finally returning and feels a sense of relief. The rest of the ship spots it too, and amid the commotion, a fight breaks out. When Captain Delano points this out to Benito Cereno, the man begins to have a fit and is comforted by Babo. Captain Delano is distracted from the fight by the scene of Babo comforting Cereno, and offers Cereno 50 gold doubloons for Babo. Babo says his master "wouldn't part with [him] for a thousand doubloons," and Cereno is not yet recovered enough to answer. Captain Delano decides to talk to some of the sailors and try to get a better

grasp on the happenings on the ship while waiting for his whaling boat to return. He walks through the crowd of people on the deck and stops at a single sailor who is tarring a strap. After observing this man for a few minutes, Delano decides he doesn't like the look of him and moves to talk to another sailor. The man corroborates Cereno's story of mishaps that had befallen ship and crew. Captain Delano then watches a young black woman sleeping with her baby and is brightened by the scene.

While wandering around the ship, Captain Delano catches sight of the Spanish sailor who made him feel uneasy earlier. The sailor is moving around in the main chains and a bunch of rigging, carrying a "marlingspike" (now spelled "marlinpike"), or a large spike used in nautical ropework. The man gestures to Delano but then skitters away as though frightened by something. Captain Delano can't decide the meaning of the gesture, however, and does nothing. He watches his boat get closer, but it is moving slowly and struggling against a tide-rip. Eventually it reaches the *San Dominick* and bumps up against the ship.

## Analysis

Captain Amasa Delano's character and prejudices are further illuminated in this section of the tale. While he continues to go round and round in his head between unease and goodwill, he also makes some observations about people on board the *San Dominick* that allow more insight into the captain's personality. After watching Babo caring for Cereno, a moved Delano tries to buy Babo from Cereno. In this moment his regard for Babo takes on a certain character. It becomes clear Delano does not value Babo as a person, but as an object he might purchase for himself. It is interesting Delano thinks he could purchase Babo's loyalty, as well as his person. Babo's loyalty is the main thing Delano is intrigued with, yet to think it could be transferred so easily from one person to another through purchase would make it a weak sort of loyalty.

Later, Captain Delano goes in search of a sailor to talk to and corroborate Cereno's story. Notably, he ignores all of the black sailors or workers and only approaches a sailor who is fairer skinned. Afterwards, the captain sees a black woman sleeping with her baby awake and trying to get milk from his mother. He likens them to a doe and fawn, using terms like "paws" and "rooting" to describe the child. This choice of analogy and description indicates Delano sees the black people around him

more as animals than as human beings. Perhaps pleasant animals, but animals nonetheless. Interestingly, he sees the other black mothers and their relationships with their children as "uncivilized" because they are "tender of heart and tough of constitution" and willing to die or fight for their children. But this definition seems as though it could apply to any mother and therefore appears a strange logic to lead to the conclusion that the women are uncivilized. However, it supports the characterization of Delano as someone who sees black people as simple, "pure," and animalistic. In fact, in a moment of trying to deduce who might be in on any sort of nefarious plan endangering him, he dismisses the black people on the ship because he assumes them too "stupid" and simple to plot, and in contrast he suspects the white people aboard, whom he regards as the naturally "shrewder race."

Though Delano continues to describe bouts of unease, or "dreamy inquietude," he never fails to swing back into the comfort of the idea that nothing bad could befall him. Delano convinces himself it is too absurd for him to be murdered "at the ends of the earth" and claims "his conscience is clean," as though this has some power to keep him from harm. This conclusion paints Captain Delano as extremely naive and full of self-importance to reason that his death in this place is unlikely or unthinkable. In fact, he has understood very little of anything around him.

## Section 4 (A Fair Wind)

### Summary

The whaling boat, named the *Rover*, arrives, and everyone helps unload the water casks. Captain Delano, with Cereno's grudging permission, doles out water to everyone. They hand around food brought by Delano's sailors, and then the boat sets off again back to Captain Delano's ship. Delano sends word to his chief officer that he will try to bring the *San Dominick* to anchor before nightfall but not to worry if it takes longer. Delano asks Benito Cereno if the *San Dominick's* own boats were lost in the storms at Cape Horn, and Cereno confirms they were lost in the gales but is confused by the mention of Cape Horn. Delano, in response, is confused as well, because Cereno had originally said that was where they ran into the terrible storms. Babo changes the focus and reminds Cereno it is his shaving time, and the three men

continue the conversation in a large cabin called the "cuddy." The narrator describes the cabin and the Spanish method of shaving in detail.

When Cereno moves, it becomes clear to Delano that fabric around his neck to protect it while shaving is actually the Spanish flag. Cereno and Delano resume their conversation, wherein Delano points out how strange it is that the *San Dominick's* voyage between Cape Horn and St. Maria took two months, when the voyage normally takes only a few days. Cereno explained they were held up by becalmed sea and strange currents. Delano is struck with the notion that Babo and Cereno are acting out some sort of strange play in front of him as Cereno talks and Babo continues to shave him.

After Cereno's shave is done, the man sits again in gloomy silence and Captain Delano leaves the cabin. A few moments later Babo comes out with a cut cheek, claiming Cereno cut him as retribution for Babo slipping a little with the razor while shaving. But a few minutes later Babo helps Cereno again as if nothing happened. Cereno's steward leads them to dinner, and while they dine, Delano attempts to ask for a private meeting with Cereno to talk about financial arrangements for the sails and other necessary items Delano will give the *St. Dominick*. Cereno refuses to send away Babo, which causes Captain Delano to feel resentful. After deciding the prices, Delano looks outside and notices a breeze stirring in the correct direction to help move the ship into shore, and he becomes excited.

Cereno is unmoved by Captain Delano's excitement about the wind. Captain Delano leaves him and goes out onto the deck to begin to pilot the ship into the cove. As he begins giving orders to the remaining sailors, he notices Babo repeating those orders to many of the black community on board, who immediately begin helping. After making sure everything is in order, Captain Delano heads back to the cabin where Cereno is sitting, hoping to catch him alone for a few moments. However, as he arrives through one door Babo arrives simultaneously through another. The ship moves quickly into the bay until it is close alongside Captain Delano's ship. Captain Delano invites Cereno to come aboard, but Cereno claims he cannot. Disgusted with Cereno's bad manners, Delano goes to return to his ship. As he moves across the *San Dominick*, he is again assailed by fears and suspicions. When he steps into the sunlight of the deck and sees his boat waiting for him, however, he brushes his fears aside again. Cereno comes out on deck and shakes Captain Delano's hand as the captain steps into his boat. Delano notes Cereno's reluctance

to let go.

## Analysis

A series of strange events that, unsurprisingly, Captain Delano manages to rationalize or set aside unfolds throughout this section of the narrative. First, despite Captain Delano's waves of trepidation, he still seems to feel safe enough to send his boat away again after the supplies have been unloaded. This contrasts with his earlier feelings of relief at having sighted the boat.

Delano seems to go back and forth between extreme prejudice and goodwill towards the black people on board the ship. Sometimes he is intensely moved by Babo's care of Cereno or the sight of a black woman with her child. Other times he clearly assumes black people are a "lesser" race and is puzzled by Cereno's occasional equal treatment of the black passengers. With a genial attitude, clearly thinking himself generous and open-minded, Captain Delano expresses his belief that "most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers." What is implied by this statement is that Delano believes black people occupy a lower position socially and evolutionarily, being made to wait on white people. While Captain Delano might have been a relatable and likeable character in the era in which this narrative was written, it is much more difficult to set aside his racism to find him an acceptable one in any contemporary reading.

The following strange occurrences that Captain Delano observes mostly relate to Babo. Delano notices a strange moment between Babo and Cereno while Babo is getting ready to shave Cereno. He stands there poised with the razor, and Delano has a notion of Babo as an executioner getting ready to take off the head of his victim. This scene is full of foreboding and is the first inkling that something is strange between Babo and Cereno. When Babo later accidentally cuts Cereno, Cereno shows nothing aside from fear. Delano comments that he feels like he is watching a play, which implies there is a feeling that somehow Babo and Cereno are putting on a show for Delano, but to what end is unclear. This whole slightly surreal scene, complete with the Spanish flag being used as a neck towel, concludes when Babo runs out of the cabin in distress that his master cut him on the cheek with the razor. It is curious Cereno shows no anger towards toward Babo in front of Captain Delano but slashes him with the razor as soon as Delano has left. This whole interplay between Babo

and Cereno raises more question marks in an already very strange and foreboding atmosphere. Finally, a key moment happens as Delano races back to Cereno's cabin in hopes of speaking with him without Babo present, and Babo seems to have raced back so as to prevent this from happening. This scene provides a strong hint as to the nature of Babo's and Cereno's real relationship and heightens the sense of foreboding.

## Section 5 (The Truth Revealed)

### Summary

Captain Amasa Delano gets into his whaleboat and the boat pushes off, but Benito Cereno suddenly jumps overboard into Delano's boat. Immediately, some of the black men on board jump off and start swimming for the boat. The boat's captain manages to fend most of them off, but Babo nearly stabs Delano. Delano takes the dagger away and throws Babo to the floor of the boat, where Babo then removes a small knife from his clothes and tries to stab Cereno. Delano grabs Babo and ties him up. He has a sudden revelation that the black people on board the ship are actually the pirates and understands they murdered Cereno's friend Aranda and commandeered the ship. The covering comes off the figurehead of the ship: it is Aranda's skeleton. Upon reaching his ship, Captain Delano decides to give chase to the *San Dominick*, despite Cereno's pleas to leave it be.

Realizing he should stay with his ship, Captain Delano sends a force of sailors with a privateer in command to chase the *San Dominick*. When the boats get too close, some of the sailors on the *San Dominick* throw their hatchets at Delano's men, injuring one sailor. Delano's sailors fire their muskets at the *San Dominick*. Their intention is not to kill the sailors on board but to take them alive with the ship. Delano's sailors get the Spanish sailors who are high in the rigging to cut the sails, and then Delano's men shoot some of the leaders on board the *San Dominick* and are able to board in the ensuing chaos. In the battle that follows about 20 black men are killed. No white men are killed, though some are wounded. Captain Delano's men lock up the remaining black people on board the ship and sail back into the cove.

## Analysis

Finally, the strange situation and all of the uneasiness becomes clear, both to Captain Delano and the reader. It seems Melville has spun his story with the intent of portraying Captain Delano as a good and just man, and therefore when the reader views the black characters through Delano's eyes, they seem good-natured and relatively harmless. There are times when Delano's own suspicions are meant to stir the reader's suspicions as well because occasionally the captain does feel a sense of menace from some of the black characters, such as the hatchet sharpeners. In the end the author paints a portrait of a captain who is too good-natured and lacks the insight needed to see the true nature of the black people on board the ships—that they are desperate pirates.

While Melville seems to be telling a very particular story of the men who mutinied and took over a ship from its "good" white officers and crew, it is difficult from a modern lens not also to see this story from the other point of view. The racist views of the protagonist and the glossing over of the fact that the black people on board were all slaves being transported have the inadvertent effect of creating sympathy for the characters who are supposed to be antagonists. For a group of slaves to overthrow and even kill their buyers or masters in a bid for freedom is viewed very differently now than it was when Melville wrote the narrative. The narrator seems to have no intention of creating sympathy for the black characters in the story, painting them rather as murderers and pirates. But to the contemporary eye they can be viewed as justified in their revolt and their desire for freedom, and the reader is given an unusual opportunity to sympathize for the antagonists, or see them in actuality not as antagonists at all.

## Section 6 (The Denouement)

### Summary

The two ships sail together to Chile and then to Lima, Peru. Benito Cereno is hospitalized and cared for by nurses and a priest. The true story of what happened on the *San Dominick* is related through the testimonies of Benito Cereno and some of his sailors. The ship initially embarked from Valparaiso, Chile. A day out of port, the slaves on board revolted and killed 18 of the white sailors. Babo and Atufal were the leaders. They

decided to leave Cereno alive to help them. They asked him if there were any totally black settlements in the area where they could go, and when Cereno replied that he knew of none, they demanded Cereno help them sail all the long way back to Senegal. Cereno insisted they needed enough water, at least, for that long of a trip, so they set sail for the island of St. Maria, which is uninhabited. Babo threatened to kill Cereno and the other remaining white sailors if they tried to reach an inhabited area. The ship was becalmed for a while, and some men died from thirst or exposure, while the last navigator on board was murdered.

The testimony then goes on to detail what was actually happening on board the *San Dominick* once it arrived into St. Maria's bay and was boarded by Captain Amasa Delano. Cereno was told to play his part with no hints to the captain about what was really going on, or Babo and Atufal would kill Cereno and the captain as well. Babo stationed the hatchet cleaners on the deck and put Atufal in chains that could be quickly removed so he would look like a prisoner. Babo stayed near Cereno the whole time, and when he drew him aside for a whispered conference, was actually making plans to commandeer Delano's ship as well. The report also confirms Captain Delano's observations that the young Spanish sailor on board, Hermenegildo Gandix, was trying to subtly warn him something was amiss.

After Cereno's deposition, Captain Amasa Delano recounts many good conversations with Cereno on their way to Lima, despite Cereno's broken spirit. Babo is hanged some months later in Lima. Benito Cereno dies three months later at a monastery.

## Analysis

After the climax of the story in which Captain Amasa Delano realizes what is really happening on the *San Dominick* and his sailors manage to capture the ship, this section is a combination of falling action and explanation. Much of this final part of the story takes place in the form of "documents" that contain a transcript of Cereno's testimony. Stylistically, this section is different from the rest of the story: it contains notes of explanation and interjections in order to give the feel of a deposition. Cereno's fragile mental state is indicated by notes stating he wandered away from his story on long tangents and strangely detailed descriptions of events during the mutiny.

Cereno provides the names of many sailors who have hitherto remained nameless and who were only glimpsed briefly through the ignorant eyes of Captain Delano. This is perhaps to indicate Cereno was a captain who knew by name everyone on board the *San Dominick* and perhaps truly cared for the white members of the crew. Unlike his sailors, besides the two main black characters of Babo and Atufal, Cereno refrains from using, or perhaps never learned, any of the other black people's names on board his ship.

It is important for a contemporary reader to note that neither Cereno nor Captain Delano at any point really sympathizes with the enslaved black passengers' bid for freedom. Cereno does reveal this is, indeed, what the black people on board the ship had hoped for since they had demanded to be dropped in an all-black colony somewhere or taken to Senegal. The fact that the black mutineers had no other aim but to secure their freedom from slavery may justify their actions. They were not, in fact, pirates hoping for money or goods, nor were they cruel and vicious simply for the sake of being cruel or vicious. Cereno specifically recounts that their only desire was to put ashore somewhere they would be free. This fact may make it more difficult for the modern reader to sympathize with either Cereno or Captain Delano, who seems to have no empathy for the black characters nor the ability to sympathize in the least with their desire to be free.

## “” Quotes

*"Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature."*

— Narrator, Section 1 (Benito Cereno's Story)

In this early introduction to Captain Amasa Delano, the reader is told by the narrator that Delano is extremely good-natured. This is an early indication of the narrator's unreliability and close connection with Delano, as it becomes clear throughout the narrative that this is also how Delano sees himself.

Captain Delano, the reader is told, feels no uneasiness about the suspicious circumstances surrounding the ship he spots entering the harbor. Even though the ship is flying no flag, which is unusual, the captain is unconcerned. And so, from the start, the reader is given a little warning about the depth of the captain's "good-naturedness" and the way it allows him to overlook possible danger.

*"The living spectacle it contains ... has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment."*

— Narrator, Section 1 (Benito Cereno's Story)

Captain Delano is overwhelmed upon boarding the strange ship. The colors and noise, the large proportion of black people in contrast to the white sailors, and the general strangeness and disrepair of the ship all create a scene that feels surreal to the captain.

This is not the only time he feels something is a little strange about the ship and those aboard it, but as per his temperament he likens his feeling to "enchantment" instead of unease.

*"In armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself, nothing more relaxes good order than misery."*

— Narrator, Section 1 (Benito Cereno's Story)

Upon taking stock of his surroundings and meeting with Benito Cereno, Captain Delano notes Cereno's bad health and the general poor condition of the crew. His interpretation of the chaos, disrepair, and lack of general orderliness about this ship is that it is caused by the miserable circumstances undergone by all aboard—most particularly by Cereno. The quotation may indicate Melville's own view of the chaotic and dangerous side of life as it is actually lived when control is weakened.

*"But it is Babo here to whom ... I owe not only my own preservation, but likewise ... the merit is due, of pacifying his more ignorant brethren."*

— Benito Cereno, Section 1 (Benito Cereno's Story)

Benito Cereno explains to Captain Delano Babo's presence and his own relationship with him. This is an important moment because of the verbal irony of what Cereno says. Babo is ultimately the cause of the deaths of many of the sailors and crew aboard the *San Dominick*, and he holds the power of life and death over Cereno.

Ultimately, what Cereno says is not untrue. He is saved because Babo orders him to sail the ship to Senegal and keeps the others from killing him. Also, he does "pacify" the other black people aboard in a way, because he is their leader and keeps them in check. However, Captain Delano interprets this statement the way the reader is meant to interpret it, believing Babo is Cereno's faithful servant.

*"He easily inferred that the young captain had not got into command at the hawsehole, but the cabin window."*

— Narrator, Section 2 (Growing Suspicion)

Captain Delano tries to figure out the confusing character of Benito Cereno. His deduction is that Cereno was not a captain who worked himself up to that rank through experience and perseverance but instead is someone who came in through "the cabin window"—i.e. someone who was able to secure his position through money or connections.

The hawsehole is the hole through which the anchor is pulled up, and being at the bottom of the ship, "coming into command through the hawsehole" would indicate starting at the bottom and working one's way up.

*"I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name."*

— Narrator, Section 2 (Growing Suspicion)

The Narrator here directly relates Captain Delano's thoughts. After witnessing an incident where a black boy hits a white boy with a knife and Benito Cereno says nothing and hands out no punishment, Captain Delano is confused and alarmed. Instead of following up on this strange incident, however, he simply decides Cereno is a bad captain and has little control over his crew or the others aboard. This is an example of an incident that should pique Delano's suspicion and curiosity; instead, he simply rationalizes with a more benign and naïve explanation.

*"There was a difference between the idea of Cereno's darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Cereno's."*

— Narrator, Section 2 (Growing Suspicion)

After a moment in which Captain Delano actually allows his imagination to begin to sense the strange and dangerous nature of what is really going on around him, he again shifts his focus away from the thoughts that disturb him. What Delano sees as his own "good nature" is more of a refusal to see the world around him as it really is.

*"His glance called away from the spectacle of disorder to the more pleasing one before him."*

— Narrator, Section 3 (The Boat is Sighted)

After watching a Spanish sailor be injured by two black men,

Delano turns to Benito Cereno in the expectation that he will do something. Instead, Cereno appears to have another fit and is supported by Babo, a scene Captain Delano finds pleasing. Again, this is another instance of Captain Delano actively choosing to let his attention be drawn away from an important and informative incident, replacing it with something he finds "more pleasing" to look upon, a more naïve view of experience.

*"Like stray white pawns venturously involved in the ranks of the chess-men opposed."*

— Narrator, Section 3 (The Boat is Sighted)

In Captain Delano's more imaginative moments he is able to sense all is not as it seems aboard the *San Dominick*. This is such an instance, in which he imagines the black and white people on the ship are chess pawns of the corresponding colors. This analogy he envisions has an underlying tone of danger, because the "white pawns" are outnumbered and in enemy territory on the chess board.

*"There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love."*

— Narrator, Section 3 (The Boat is Sighted)

Captain Delano thinks this about the black women he watches lying around on the deck. It is a thought that shows the way Captain Delano thinks. Besides his automatic relation of the black women to wild things, it is the way he conceives of nature that is telling. That Delano equates "naked nature" with "tenderness and love" paints him as someone critically naïve of the cruel and dark sides of nature.

He views nature as something he can put human emotions on—the emotions of "tenderness and love"—instead of seeing it realistically as a force that is wild, untamable, and with little relation to human feeling. In turn, this hints to the reader something of the true nature of the black people on board who do not fit into Delano's limited worldview.

*"Docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind."*

— Narrator, Section 4 (A Fair Wind)

This comment, reflecting Delano's view of black people generally, is a more overt comment on his belief that black people lack the intelligence and independent thought to act for themselves. It is racism at its most virulent height, indicative of some people's attitudes at the time.

*"Possibly, the vexation might have been something different, were it not for the brisk confidence inspired by the breeze."*

— Narrator, Section 4 (A Fair Wind)

Again, in this moment when Captain Delano is irritated, Babo returns to Benito Cereno's cabin at the same moment he himself does, the reader is shown how Delano turns away from something of significance and focuses on the positive news of the fair wind blowing the ship into the bay. Instead of following up on the strangeness of the fact that Babo never allows Delano to be alone with Benito Cereno, Delano turns his attention to something he better understands.

*"Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths. But the pale sailors' teeth were set."*

— Narrator, Section 5 (The Truth Revealed)

In this image the mutineers on the *San Dominick* are no longer characterized as docile animals but as vicious ones. The wolf has long been an animal associated (inaccurately) with viciousness towards humans. The narrator purposefully

introduces the contrast of the evil black and red of the mutineers to the righteous paleness and white teeth of the sailors. This is meant to characterize the white sailors as a force of good and the black mutineers as evil animals.

*"You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?"*

— Captain Amasa Delano, Section 6 (The Denouement)

On their way to Lima after the defeat of the mutineers, Captain Delano asks Benito Cereno this question. Cereno's answer is "the negro."

Benito Cereno, despite being "saved," is still deeply affected by the trauma of his experiences. And yet his answer seems to indicate he blames the black race generally and not just those aboard his ship. This is one of the most critical moments of the narrative because it seems the narrator is doing something more than making a commentary on Cereno's experience.

Some critics have pointed out that this could be Melville's own commentary on the rising up of enslaved people and the overthrow of American slavery that is soon to come in the Civil War (1861–65). Regardless, at the end of the narrative the black person is ultimately held responsible for all of the bad that happened. There is no sense of accountability or empathy given by either Benito Cereno or Captain Delano. The force and power of the quotation took on added levels of meaning in the 20th-century era of racial equality and civil rights, and not in a positive sense, yet these words are believable given the characters of the story.

*"Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader."*

— Narrator, Section 6 (The Denouement)

The mutineers scrawled the slogan "follow your leader" on the side of the *San Dominick* as a warning to Benito Cereno that they would kill him like they did Alexandro Aranda if he doesn't cooperate. This final line of the narrative depicts Benito Cereno's death a few months after the trial: he does finally

follow his friend Alexandro Aranda into death.

## Symbols

### Shaving Razor

In a tense, disturbing scene of *Benito Cereno* Babo sharpens a razor and shaves his "master's" face and neck while Benito Cereno shakes in terror. Captain Delano does not know what to make of this scene and so convinces himself it is an instance of the well-behaved and devoted servant attending to his master. The razor in this scene symbolizes power, but the type of power it represents differs according to character. For Babo it represents his newfound power over a white man's life and death. As he shaves Benito Cereno, both parties are acutely aware of how easy it would be for Babo to end Cereno's life in that moment. Thus, for Cereno the razor represents his subjugation to Babo's control. But to the outsider Captain Delano the act of a servant shaving his master represents the power of Cereno's position as captain and master. In this one brief scene the razor holds multiple layers of meaning.

### Atufal's Chains

Atufal's chains, like the razor Babo uses to shave Cereno, carry meaning that varies by perspective. Captain Delano sees these chains as a symbol of Benito Cereno's control over the black people aboard the *San Dominick*, as the mutineers mean him to see them. However, he also notes Atufal's "royal spirit" and the way the chains do not seem to diminish or shame him. In Delano's eyes Atufal's way of wearing the chains with pride and poise makes him doubly interesting and kingly. However, for Atufal the chains probably represent a necessary indignity in the role he is playing in order to gain his freedom. For Benito Cereno the chains are a taunt and a farce: Atufal is no more under his control than are any of the other mutineers. The chains are a mocking reminder of Benito Cereno's own subjugated position on his ship as he, too, is enchained.

## Themes

### Racial Tension

The tension of race is at the core of the narrative and conflict in *Benito Cereno*. The inherent power dynamic between the white sailors and officers and the black slaves or mutineers is what creates the tension in the story. Because the story is narrated unreliably through the perceptions and limitations of Captain Amasa Delano, the perceptions of race are equally prejudiced. Captain Delano observes again and again his belief that black people are a lower race than white. He expresses benevolent feelings about black people generally but compares his feelings about them to those of a man who is fond of his dog, saying that his feelings towards the "black race" are "as other men to Newfoundland dogs." His comparison of black people to dogs provides a clear insight into his worldview: white people are the natural rulers, masters, and caretakers of black people. While at no point depicted as a cruel man, Captain Delano still represents the idea of the "kind slaveholder," helping to perpetuate ignorance and prejudice in the guise of having the black person's best interest at heart.

After the mutiny is made clear to Captain Delano and reader alike, the racial perceptions of the novel shift somewhat. Now the black people aboard the *San Dominick* are no longer simple-minded, subservient cargo—they are clever, ruthless men who will go to any lengths to win their freedom. They are suddenly not so different from the white man. The narration portrays the black mutineers as vicious, evil murderers because the narration is from a white point of view. The white characters do not see themselves in their black counterparts—they explain away their actions because the slaves are either simple and made to serve or evil. There is no understanding of their right as human beings to try to escape enslavement or win their freedom. This biased perception, whether purposeful or a reflection of the author's own viewpoint, however Melville may have seen the politics of his time, provides the foundation of *Benito Cereno's* plot. In Captain Delano's eyes the black characters may be docile deer and domesticated dogs, or they may be vicious predators with "their red tongues [lolling], wolf-like," but they are animals either way.

## Oppression and Power

*Benito Cereno* is a narrative built around the power play between the white sailors on the *San Dominick* and the black slaves who are being transported. The ship sets out with a full crew and a large number of slaves belonging to Benito Cereno's friend, Alexandro Aranda. Initially, the white crew and Aranda are the oppressors, with the power of life and death over the slaves. While the ship doesn't seem to be transporting people in the fashion of many of the horrific slave ships of the day, the black people on board were still the property and cargo of their Spanish master, who might end their lives or change its course on a whim.

The mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*, wherein they killed or gained control over all of the white sailors on board, causes the power to move into their hands. The white sailors who are still alive must follow every directive of any of the black people on board, for fear of their lives. This is not so different from how the enslaved people on board lived before the mutiny. What is interesting is that the perspectives given in the narrative paint the white race as being inherently correct in its power over their black counterparts, but when the black people take control they are depicted as evil and bloodthirsty.

## Benevolence and Charity

Captain Amasa Delano's "good-natured" tendency to charitable acts and thoughts toward his fellow humans almost gets him killed multiple times but ultimately saves Benito Cereno's life. This charity first prompts Delano to take a boat out to check on the *San Dominick* despite its suspicious appearance, setting in motion the events that constitute the story. But it is this same charity and benevolent attitude that make Captain Delano incapable of seeing what is really going on around him. He is so determined not to suspect those around him of wrongdoing that he completely misses the danger of the situation he has entered and the danger Benito Cereno is in.

Additionally, Delano's so-called "benevolent" attitude towards the black people on board makes him unable to see the black

mutineers as being capable of creative, independent thought that might lead to unified action. Every time he suspects a particular person or scenario aboard the *San Dominick*, such as the hatchet-polishers, he quickly reassures himself with a comparison of the black people to docile or simple-minded animals. He feels pride in his kind and benevolent attitude toward black people generally, and his own lack of ability to see them as human beings like himself almost proves his undoing. In the end, while Captain Delano may become the savior of Benito Cereno, he also brings about the doom of the black mutineers and their attempt at freedom, so there is no easy solution to the situation of the slaves and their desire for freedom, but rather, an unsolvable dilemma.