



Introduction

Benito Cereno

Plot Summary

In the year 1799, the captain of the *Bachelor's Delight*, an American sealer and trading boat, encounters a ghostly ship while on an expedition off the coast of Chile. It flies no flag, and in the misty stillness, Captain Amassa Delano, of Duxbury, Massachusetts, experiences some fleeting doubts before he proceeds to determine whether it is a ship in distress or some dangerous craft to be avoided. As his ship draws nearer, Delano perceives that it is slave ship. Battered and mouldy, it appears to have been launched "from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones." Bravely, Delano sets out in a small whale boat to board the *San Dominick*, as its faded letters proclaim. There he enters a world of suffering whose origins he is too naive to suspect.

What he observes on board the *San Dominick* is a Spanish crew greatly outnumbered by slaves; a feeble and unstrung Captain, Benito Cereno, constantly tended by a solicitous servant, Babo. He also notes the presence of strange groups of Negroes on board the ruined ship—"oakum pickers" and "hatcher polishers" who remain constantly at their stations on deck. The general laxity of discipline on the *San Dominick* Delano finds objectionable, ascribing it to the unstable condition of the ship's captain. When Cereno relates the one hundred ninety day ordeal they have endured in which gale storms played havoc with the ship, plagues devastated his crew, many died from scurvy, and long calms kept them from sailing, Delano understands the hunger and decay and devastation he sees before him. Cereno proclaims, "It is Babo here to whom, under God, I owe... my own preservation." "Faithful fellow!" cried Captain Delano, "Don Benito I envy you such a friend: slave I cannot call him!"

There is a terrible irony in this exchange, one that the reader gradually grasps, but one to which Delano is far from understanding. As the hours pass and Delano waits for the winds to gather and his ship to draw near, he witnesses strange occurrences aboard the *San Dominick*. Sometimes ignoring his doubts that things are not as they have been presented to him, sometimes forcibly sending these doubts from his mind, Delano reassures himself. His convictions in a benevolent Providence and the docility of Negroes whom he contends, are fitted by nature to serve the white race, are never questioned.

Delano continues to remark on the unruliness of the Negroes and the frailty of Cereno; his inability to take control or to observe the conventions of his station cause Delano to lose patience. When a supply ship arrives and Delano presents food and water to the beleaguered populace of the *San Dominick*, an incident occurs which causes Delano to fear he will be murdered. He reflects on the unreliable

character of the Spanish race, on the inconsistent authority of Cereno. When order is restored, however, Delano quashes his fears. Later, at the imminent approach of his ship, the tension again mounts. Delano's request that Don Benito visit his sealer that evening is rejected, and Delano concludes that this poor captain's demeanor is simply beyond reasonable understanding. "I cannot go," is all the explanation Cereno offers, disappearing below deck without a formal farewell, accompanied by the ever-present Babo. Minutes before Delano is to board his ship, Cereno appears suddenly, grasping Delano's hand. "Go," he says...tearing his hand loose. "Go, and God guard you better than me, my best friend."

Surprised at this sudden outburst of deep feeling, Delano chides himself on his low opinion of Cereno, then boards the *Bachelor's Delight*. Instantly, Don Benito springs over the bulwarks and falls at Delano's feet. "This pirate means murder!" Delano shouts as Babo and a host of Negroes jump onto the ship, but Babo attacks both Delano and his master. And in this moment Delano understands what he had failed to see before, "Now with the scales dropped from his eyes he saw the Negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult (but)... in ferocious piratical revolt!"

Ordering his men to attack the *San Dominick*, Delano feels Benito pull his hand. "What! Have you saved my life, Señor, and are you now going to throw away your own?"

The unarmed ship, however, is no match for the *Bachelor's Delight* and the pirates are soon conquered. They set sail for Lima and for trial, with Babo in the hold. Through a transcript of the trial the reader learns the terrible details of the slave revolt which had occurred on board the *San Dominick*—the real story of Cereno's ordeal—the massacre of the slave owner and crew, the tyranny of Babo, and the determination of the slaves to be returned to a "Negro country." Against this reality, Delano's beliefs appear hollow, indeed—his faith in a benevolent Providence, his view of the Negro as a race fitted for and content in slavery.

Realizing only that had he understood the situation on board the *San Dominick* from the outset, it might have cost him his life, Delano does not reflect on the inadequacies of his beliefs, but thinks of the future and the need for Benito Cereno to forget his ordeal. Although he has erred in judging the condition of his fellow captain, he still does not fathom the depths of what has unfolded. "You are saved, Don Benito," he tells his friend, "What has cast such a shadow upon you?" "The Negro," Cereno responds. Delano makes no reply. Several months later, as the novel concludes, Benito Cereno dies.

Vocabulary

(Suggestion: Provide students with vocabulary definitions beforehand to increase reading comprehension and enjoyment.)

Page	Word	Definition
39	undulated	moved in a wavy pattern
	imputation	slur
	malign	speak harmful truths about
40	apprise	to notify
41	somnambulistic	like a sleepwalker
	lethargic	sluggish, without energy
	castellated	built like a castle, with battlements
	turret	a small tower, a horizontal mount for guns
	hermetically	completely sealed, often airtight
42	grizzled	grey
	venerable	commanding great respect because of age or dignity
43	saturnine	having a sluggish or gloomy temperament
44	languor	physical weakness, faintness
46	splenetic	irritable or spiteful
57	vindictiveness	vengefulness
58	duplicity	deceitfulness in speech or conduct
59	pertinacious	stubbornly persistent
61	enigmas	mysteries
	portents	forebodings, warnings of something that is to come
66	ursine	resembling a bear
72	trepidations	feelings of dread
	capricious	changing unpredictably
105	harangued	spoken in a long pompous
		passionate speech
106	officious	objectionably forward in offering services or advice

Questions for Discussion/ Comprehension

- How does Melville establish the atmosphere upon which the story opens? Select three paragraphs in which the language sets the mood for the reader.
- From whose point of view is the story told?
- What kind of ship does Captain Delano see approaching the harbor off Santa Maria? What is its valuable freight? Describe the condition of the ship and what is meant by the phrase "showing no colours"? Why might this have been a dangerous sign?
- What is the "tale of suffering" that Captain Delano learns from the slaves and from Benito Cereno?
- What impression does Delano form of Captain Benito Cereno? What incidents on board the ship does Delano find shocking? What does Delano believe has caused these incidents to occur? What do you believe has caused them?
- Describe the different groups of slaves aboard the *San Dominick* and the specific chores each performs.
- How does Delano account for Benito Cereno's faintness and his shifting moods?
- What are some of Captain Delano's suspicions about the *San Dominick*?
- Select quotes from the text that reveal Captain Delano's views on the relative intelligence of the white race versus that of the black race and the fitness of the Negro for serving whites. Do you believe this is also Melville's view? Explain.

- Why does the narrator twice make the point that "the country and the ocean are cousins"?
- What does the shaving scene suggest to Captain Delano? To the reader? What conclusion does Delano draw from observing Cereno's reaction to being cut by Babo? What growing fears are aroused in Captain Delano? How does this contribute to the reader's suspense? How reliable an observer do you consider Delano to be at this point? Why do you believe this?
- What other possible explanations for the action on board the *San Dominick* can you imagine at this point? What evidence does Melville give for a position contrary to the one Delano has taken?
- What are the apparent causes for Delano's inability to have a moment alone with Benito Cereno?
- What are Delano's suspicions and how does he allay them? What is his world view? What does he believe about "good actions to ungrateful parties"?
- What are Benito Cereno's final words to Captain Delano? What unusual action does he take after Delano has boarded his ship? How does Delano respond to this?
- Why is it Delano thinks Babo is going to stab him? What is Babo's objective at this point? Why does this arouse Delano's understanding? What action does he order as a result of this revelation?
- Describe the mutiny on board the *San Dominick* as it is revealed in Benito Cereno's deposition. Who were its chief perpetrators? What were the actions? What were their objectives?
- What is the significance of the phrase "Follow your leader" and of the figure on the bow of the *San Dominick*? What were the actual roles of a) Babo, b) Atufal, c) the hatchet polishers, and d) the old caulkers on the *San Dominick*?
- Why does Captain Delano say that had he been more suspicious "acuteness might have cost me my life without saving another's"?
- What does it show about Captain Delano's understanding that he says, "The past is passed. Why moralize upon it? Forget it." What is Benito Cereno's response to this?

Literature Analysis

- If the novel is called "Benito Cereno," why do you imagine Melville relates the events that unfold from the point of view of Captain Delano? What is his purpose in doing so? What effect does this have on the reader?
- Today we call it the flashback technique; Melville describes it as a story which "instead of being set down in the order of occurrence (is) retrospectively . . . given." Outline the main actions that the novel explores in chronological order. How does the flashback technique contribute to the novel's suspense? What other purpose does it serve?
- How does Melville show the contrast between the way things appear to be and the way things really are, in *Benito Cereno*. What other works of literature have you read in which the theme of appearance versus reality is evident?
- As a novel published before the Civil War, what conclusions can you draw about the treatment of and attitude towards "the negro" from the incidents in *Benito Cereno*? Do you think the author shares Captain Delano's view of slavery and of the Negro? Find evidence for your opinion. What does *Benito Cereno* offer in terms of a moral lesson on the subject of slavery? Which character(s) in the novel have absorbed this lesson? Which ones have failed to do so?