

A Good Natured Warning: Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"

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In his essay "Experience," Emerson makes an interesting inference concerning the nature of the nineteenth-century American consciousness. "In this our talking America, we are ruined by our good nature and listening on all sides" (490). Embedded within this statement lies a strong ethnocentric implication that America is limited only by its naturally benevolent demeanor. In Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," one can see a similar criticism of such a benevolent yet detrimental character trait within the American captain Amasa Delano; however, Melville's notion of "good nature" is quite different from Emerson's. The term "good nature" is used quite often in "Benito Cereno" but not in the way one would most commonly perceive it, as in 'good by nature.' If it is in one's nature to be good then it should be a quality that comes naturally, not forced. Melville does not seem to share in this notion of inherency. Rather than revealing itself naturally through actions or words, Delano's demeanour seems often rationalized and contrived. This begs the question, how can something be both natural and contrived at the same time? Close reading of Melville's text in conjunction with the original narrative of captain Amasa Delano, as well as careful dissection of Melville's use of the term "good nature," the Christian-American perception of both the African slaves and the Spanish as being inferior, and the inability to recognize man's inherent struggle for freedom, will show that Melville has placed a warning for America deep within "Benito Cereno." Captain Amasa Delano's "good nature," in the form of his conscious ethnocentric naiveté, symbolizes America's ignorance of an innate driving goal of humanity: the yearning for freedom of the African slave, by any means necessary.

Most scholars place Delano's inability to grasp what has transpired aboard the ship in either one of two categories: subconscious or conscious. He is either subconsciously unaware of man's capacity for evil and therefore unable to see what is happening before him; or he is conscious of man's ability to commit evil but is simply too ignorant to figure it out. Critics such as Paul David Johnson and Dennis Pahl believe Delano is not led by rational choice, but rather by a "moral blindness that exists within himself" (Johnson 427), a subconscious nature to "desire *not to see*" (Pahl 174). The problem with this interpretation is that there are moments when Delano is very aware of his surroundings. In fact, during one of the more commonly alluded to scenes by critics, the shaving scene, Delano is conscious enough to figure out that what is taking place before him is a play of sorts. In this scene, he comes to the cusp of the truth; and though he dismisses what is ultimately the correct assumption, he is nonetheless perceptive enough to come to a conclusion, rationalize it, and then dismiss it. Though he fails to see the truth, it is still a conscious decision to dismiss the scene as simply another instance of Don Benito's weakness as a captain. If he is rationalizing the situations that he is in then he is not acting through his subconscious. Therefore, we must look at Delano as a conscious individual, one responsible for his decisions.

If he consciously perceives his surroundings, then the next question would seem to be, is he simply an ignorant character, unable to see what is taking place on the ship? Reinhold J. Dooley and David Kirby see a more conscious Delano, aware of his surroundings but unable to solve the mystery aboard the ship due to a lack of intelligence. "In Melville's world, the most successful people are the smart ones who are nonetheless not too smart" (Kirby 154). Dooley goes so far as to call Delano "oblivious" (49) and unable to comprehend even at the end of story what has occurred before him (47). Though throughout the story Delano may be oblivious to the events transpiring before him, he is far from oblivious by the end of the story. Delano is fully aware of what has occurred on the ship. He knows that "Had [he] dropped the least hint, made the least advance towards an under-

standing between [himself and Cereno], death [...] would have ended the scene" (73). Furthermore, it is Cereno who tells us why Delano is not struck with trauma. "So far may even the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted" (74). Delano does not experience the terror that Cereno does. Therefore, the question is not whether or not Delano is aware of what has happened. He is quite aware of the danger he was in. Delano is able to continue with life not because of his ignorance, but because he knows "yon bright sun has forgotten it all" (74) and so must he. He cannot sympathize with Cereno because he does not perceive the mutiny aboard the *San Dominick* in the same manner. He is aware of the need to move on and chooses to put the events behind him. In doing so, he makes the decision to continue living. If Delano is neither acting subconsciously, nor ignorant of his surroundings, then he is acting consciously based upon a specific rationale. Melville reveals this rationale of his American captain as based upon a notion of conscious "good nature." To better understand this mode of thought, we must first look at Delano's nature in the original *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* and then look at Melville's interpretation of this "good nature" ideology.

In *The Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, Delano introduces himself as a very rational individual. His crew was in shambles due to the deaths of many good seamen. To make matters worse, there were convicts that stowed away on board the ship, which made the maintaining of order all the more difficult; however, Delano was able to manage his crew.

[M]y crew were refractory; the convicts were ever unfaithful, and took all the advantage that opportunity gave them. But sometimes exercising very strict discipline, and giving them wholesome floggings; and at other times treating them with the best I had, or could get, according to their deeds deserved, I managed them without much difficulty. (*Narrative* 320)

His punishments are according to "their deeds." Delano does not seem preoccupied with generalities of man's inherent good or evil. He

judges the men by their actions. For Delano, it is a person's actions that reveal the character of the individual. Much like his acts of discipline, when confronted with a situation, such as the abhorrent state of the *Tryal*, he addresses the situation first and then acts accordingly. "Presuming the vessel was from sea, and had been many days out, without perhaps fresh provisions, we put the fish which had been caught the night before in the boat, to be presented if necessary" (*Narrative* 322). Again, we see a man basing his decisions on cause and effect. He will present the food only if necessary. This is not a blind act of good nature. Furthermore, he comments on his benevolent mood aboard the ship as being "unusually pleasant" (323). This depicts his state of mind as being rather unusual, indicating that had he been more like himself that day, the events might have turned out differently. In *The Narrative* it is Delano's uncharacteristically benevolent mood that saves his life; however, in Melville's tale, it is Delano's characteristically good nature that saves him. This begs the question, why change the narrator's disposition from an unusually pleasant Delano in *The Narrative*, to a good-natured individual in "Benito Cereno"? Melville is too great a writer to believe this to be simply a matter of artistic license. Therefore, he must be saying something through his version of Delano. Before we can uncover the reasoning behind Melville's reinterpretation of Delano's character, we must first establish Melville's notion of "good nature" and how it correlates with nineteenth-century American ideology.

Melville defines Delano as a character of "good nature," a motif that will be repeated throughout the story. The term "good nature" must be further clarified in order to understand its relevance within the framework of nineteenth-century American ideology. Melville defines the driving characteristic of his American captain as follows:

Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful goodnature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated, incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man.

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The key word in Melville's description of Delano is "indulge." When one indulges in something, he or she yields to a higher authority of need. Delano, even upon "extraordinary and repeated incentives," does not indulge himself in recognizing the possibility of inherent evil in mankind. If indulgence is in fact a yielding to strong desires, then it would require a conscious effort on the part of Amasa Delano to suppress this yearning. Delano chooses to believe man as inherently good until proven otherwise. In true Melville fashion, there is a bit of ambiguity in this description of the American captain. Delano is described as a good-natured man; yet, throughout the text he rationalizes events aboard the ship until they make sense to his nature. If he cannot rationalize the situation, he simply ignores it. How can something be both a part of one's nature and yet rationalized? It is here that Melville not only begins his tale, but seems to begin his commentary on nineteenth-century Christian-American ideology, an ideology claiming to be inherently good, yet, according to Melville, rationally evil.

Melville's quarrel with Christianity is well known and well documented by critics. In his first novel, *Typee*, he tells the story of a deterred French invasion of the Polynesian islands, in which,

The invaders, on their march back to the sea, consoled themselves for their repulse by setting fire to every house and temple in their route; and a long line of smoking ruins defaced the once-smiling bosom of the valley, and proclaimed to its pagan inhabitants the spirit that reigned in the breasts of Christian soldiers. (26)

Melville's attack here is not limited to Europe. He comments on America as well in the novel. He believes "four or five Marquesan Islanders sent to the United States as Missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans despatched to the islands in a similar capacity" (126). For Melville, the civilized nation of America would do well to learn from the uncivilized Marquesan Islanders. Civilized Christianity seems to breed destruction, according to Melville. He notes that after a Christian crusade of burning and slaughtering, the pillagers "call upon all Christendom to applaud their courage

and their Justice" (27). At the end of "Benito Cereno," Delano and Cereno seem to do the same. Cereno says, "God charmed your life" (73). To which Delano replies, "Yes, all is owing to Providence, I know" (73). Within the character of Delano, Melville places not simply an American ideology, but a providential Christian-American one that was quite evident in America at the time Melville wrote his story.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, America, still struggling for a unified identity amongst a diverse population, nonetheless, still had extremely strong ties to its early Puritan settlers. David Kirby notes in Delano a feeling of "invincibility that suggests Americans are, as the early settlers described themselves, a latter-day version of the Chosen People" (148). Though Kirby makes an interesting correlation, he does not extend his comparison to the full impact of the allusion. Before Moses delivered the Israelites from bondage, the Egyptians, who undoubtedly felt it their right to rule over the Jewish nation, oppressed God's Chosen People. Melville could undoubtedly see the hypocritical nature of this American ideology, attempting to parallel itself to the enslaved Israelites of the Bible. Though nineteenth-century Americans may have believed themselves to be God's new Chosen People, when it came to its dealings with the African race, America acted as the oppressor, not the oppressed. In "Benito Cereno," Melville reminds America that it too is involved in this slave trade. More than that, just as the Jews were delivered from slavery, the young American nation naïvely believes it has a firm grasp on the institution of slavery, and of the enslaved people; however, the question is, how long can a group of people be completely controlled? "Benito Cereno" seems to remind America that a revolt is inevitable.

Throughout the text, Delano is confronted with suspicious events that take place before him; yet he constantly makes a conscious effort to remove any suspicion from his mind. At one point, thinking that perhaps Don Benito may be planning to murder him, he reprimands himself for even considering such a heinous act fathomable. He asserts, "Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean" (34). The notion implied here is that evil does not simply act without

provocation. Since his conscience is clean, having wronged no one, no man has due claim to harm him; therefore, no one will harm him. This adolescent logic, though comforting to Delano, is clearly not sufficient to convince him that all is right aboard the ship. "Though ashamed of the relapse, he could not altogether subdue it; and so, exerting his good nature to the utmost, insensibly he came to a compromise" (35). He is "ashamed" of his momentary lapse of faith in mankind. Here again, Melville uses the term "good nature" in a way that does not constitute an inherent goodness in Delano, but rather a carefully conceived form of restraint. It becomes something that can be controlled, measured, and acted upon by Delano to make it work. He must "exert" his good nature in this situation. It does not happen naturally. Even though it takes every last bit of his benevolence to keep from thinking unpleasant thoughts towards the ship and its crew, he still chooses to believe that mankind is inherently good, and, therefore, incapable of unprovoked evil.

Delano, growing more suspicious of his surroundings, continues to allow his rationalized good nature to blind him from any clues that may lead him to uncover the truth. Believing "the whites [...], by nature, [...] [to be] [...] the shrewder race," (32) he limits his inquiry of events to the Spanish seamen. After questioning one of the remaining Spaniards, he notices that "as [the Africans] became talkative, [the Spaniard] became mute, and at length quite glum, [seeming] morosely unwilling to answer more questions, and yet, all the while, this ursine air was somehow mixed with his sheepish one" (29). Delano is aware of his surroundings and aware of the Spaniard's growing unwillingness to speak in the presence of the Africans. He says, "And yet—and yet, now that I think of it, that very old fellow, if I err not, was one of those who seemed so earnestly eyeing me here awhile since" (29). Delano recognizes the Spaniard as one of the men trying so intently to catch his eye, as if to tell him something; yet, this does not seem to arouse Delano to action. One would think that an awkward moment such as this one would leave the captain in a more inquisitive state; however, he describes himself as "feeling a little strange at first, he

could hardly tell why, but upon the whole with regained confidence in Benito Cereno" (29). He is simply ignoring the signs around him, a conscious choice on his part. "All this is very queer now, thought Captain Delano, with a qualmish sort of emotion; but, as one feeling incipient sea-sickness, he strove, by ignoring the symptoms, to get rid of the malady" (33). As Melville does throughout the story, he initiates the spark of an idea or notion in his American captain only to reverse it within the same statement. He lets his readers know that something "queer" is going on yet he forces them to banish it by pointing them in another direction. In this respect, the reader is led on much like Delano in a myriad of ambiguous notions that do not seem to point to any significant conclusion.

In one of the more unsettling scenes in the story, the shaving scene, Delano completely misinterprets the body language of Don Benito as one of a coward. "Poor fellow, thought Captain Delano, so nervous he can't even bear the sight of barber's blood; [...] is it credible that I should have imagined he meant to spill all my blood, who can't endure the sight of one little drop of his own?" (43). Though Delano, in his "good nature," is quick to dismiss the situation around him, he is not unaware of his environment. The shaving scene reveals to Delano the possibility that "master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs, some juggling play before him" (44). After making this observation, he quickly justifies it as his own imagination. "At last, regarding the notion as a whimsy, insensibly suggested, perhaps, by the theatrical aspect of Don Benito in his harlequin ensign [...]" (44). This poignant scene is the closest that the American captain comes to realizing the truth; however, he banishes the thought, believing Cereno's theatrical mannerisms to be simply a part of the captain's character. He finds the idea of such a sinister and well-thought-out plot "whimsical." The notion that both Benito Cereno and Babo could devise such a plan is preposterous to Delano. "Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with negroes?" (32). Here Delano

goes so far as to refer to the Africans as “almost” a different “species.” In his mind, the only way to justify such a devious plan is to prove Don Benito to be the leader. Given the amount of planning needed to produce such a scheme, the only way feasible to Delano would be for a white man to orchestrate such an event. Here lies the reasoning behind Delano’s inability to see the revolt aboard the ship. He, like Don Benito, underestimates the intelligence and the drive of the African slaves to attain freedom; however, considering Delano’s gross misconceptions of the Africans as irrational beings, his inability to see them as the masterminds behind this mutiny is understandable. Delano does not seem to extend his “good nature” equally to the whites and the blacks. If it is in Delano’s nature to believe mankind inherently good until proven otherwise, why does he advise Don Benito to “keep all your blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task, and no matter what happens to the ship?” (15). The answer lies in Delano’s view of the Africans.

It is important to establish Captain Delano’s perception of the African not as a human being, but as an uncivilized animal. He continually makes this comparison of the African to a beast rather than a human, thus giving himself almost a divine right to dominion over them. Edward Grejda notes: “The Negroes in *Benito Cereno* are neither Delano’s docile subservients nor ravenous animals. Both assessments represent an extreme, an indictment of an entire race by a man whose concern lies with the ‘common continent of men’” (91). Delano, in constantly comparing the Africans to animals, is ultimately taking away their humanity; thus, the Africans are excluded from this common continent of men. “Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (41). Here he describes not simply his relationship with enslaved Africans, but with Africans in general as a master to his dog, the implied notion being that they are like domesticated animals, able to be loved but in need of a master to take care of them. A domesticated animal will act upon the will of the owner, and not of its own will. We can see further examples of this when Delano discusses the African women.

Delano describes the African women much in the same way as the men, more as animals than human beings. They are “Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves” (30). Once again, Delano dehumanizes the Africans by showing that the only way to describe them is through animal imagery. Delano comments on the female African intellect as a “docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind” (41). In depicting the Africans as being content to live in a world where they do not need to rationalize situations, Delano takes away the humanity of the blacks aboard the ship and depicts them as animals whose lives are better off as servants. He goes so far as to suppose the Africans’ involvement in a plan, along with Don Benito, to murder him; however, this is quickly pushed aside when Delano’s logic reminds him that “they were too stupid” (32) to succeed in such a plan. Though Delano explicitly asserts his racial superiority over the Africans, interestingly enough, the Africans are not the only race deemed somewhat inferior to the American captain.

Upon first witnessing Benito Cereno, Delano is quick to judge the captain based upon his attire. He describes Cereno’s dress as follows:

The Spaniard wore a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white small-clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash—the last being an almost invariable adjunct, more for utility than ornament, of a South American gentleman’s dress to this hour. (13)

Delano does not hold back his judgments of the Spanish captain’s flamboyant attire. He says, “However unsuitable for the time and place, at least in the blunt-thinking American’s eyes, [...] the toilette of Don Benito might not, in fashion at least, have gone beyond the style of the day among South Americans of his class” (13). His first inclination is that this attire is “unsuitable for the time”; however, he supposes that this is the way a Spanish captain of his “class” would dress while out at sea. The implication is that Don Benito is first and foremost a man concerned with class and stature before his duties as captain of a vessel. He further implies this notion when “Eyeing Don Benito’s small, yellow hands, he easily inferred that the young captain

had not got into command at the hawse-hole, but the cabin-window" (14). Here he is implying that Don Benito did not earn his status as captain, but attained it through social, political, or economic status. He has not earned it like Delano has, through hard work. These judgments are not limited to Don Benito's attire.

After the incident involving the young Spaniard being struck over the head by the slave, Delano is quick to assert his opinion on the matter. "Had such a thing happened on board the Bachelor's Delight, instant punishment would have followed" (15). To this Cereno simply replies, "Doubtless, doubtless, Señor" (15). For Delano, this is a sign of weakness on the part of the Spanish captain. "I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name" (15). Sandra A. Zagarell points out that Delano's "plan to reestablish order by withdrawing Cereno's command and placing his own surrogate, his second mate, in charge until Cereno is well enough to be 'restored to authority' indicates how important the hierarchy of command is to him" (249). Zagarell further notes: "to depose another captain, however gently and temporarily, is to assume that the proper wielding of authority takes precedence over considerations of national sovereignty or private ownership of the vessel" (249). Delano, in assuming command of the situation, is essentially saying that those aboard the ship are unsuited to making such decisions. Therefore, it is up to him. Considering Spain's extensive experience as a naval power, one would think the Spanish seamen are well aware of the chain of command aboard a vessel and are able to handle such situations; yet Delano still feels the need to fix the situation by taking control of it and appointing the second in command as the new captain. As Zagarell points out, he does not consider the politics or economics behind displacing Cereno's authority. Here we can see the ethnocentrism of Delano in assuming an authoritative position aboard the *San Dominick*. He is asserting his authority not simply as a captain, but as an American.

His judgments of the Spaniards are not based solely on seamanship either. "But as a nation—continued he in his reveries—these Span-

iards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it" (36). Critics such as Dennis Pahl cite this statement as an indication of Delano's racism towards the Spanish as well as the Africans. In Pahl's essay, "The Gaze of History in 'Benito Cereno,'" he notes, "Delano feels that he represents the most enlightened form of humanity, far surpassing those cultures—African and European—that come to signify for him the unenlightened past" (176). Pahl is correct in his assessment of Delano's American ethnocentricity; however, what is equally disturbing about this statement is Delano's abrupt reversal. He states, "And yet, I dare say, Spaniards in the main are as good folks as any in Duxbury, Massachusetts" (36). Delano's first statement is all-inclusive. "[T]hese Spaniards are *all* an odd set." The second statement only relieves the Spaniards "in the main" from their conspirator-like stereotype. That may leave the Spanish seamen still under the general label of conspirators by nature. In the beginning of the story, Delano states that he is "a person of singularly undistrustful goodnature" (1); however, throughout the story, he remains very much distrustful of the Spanish captain and his crew. These distrustful feelings seem to indicate that Delano is indeed capable of seeing mankind's capacity for malevolence; however, though Delano's natural instincts warn him about the state of affairs on the ship, he willingly suppresses these feelings through a conscious choice to see, "in the main," the good in individuals, and it is for this reason that Delano is unable to see the events transpiring before him.

After the revolt has come to full light, the deposition reveals the intricacies of what has transpired. "That all the negroes slept upon deck, as is customary in this navigation, and none wore fetters, because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him that they were all tractable" (63). Herein lies the problem. Had they been in fetters, it is likely the revolt would not have occurred, or at least, would not have succeeded as it did. Since there were no boundaries set, the line between master and slave was not clearly visible. One cannot expect a captive human being to yield to authority simply based upon merit. In treating the slaves as mindless, obedient dogs, the Spanish sailors underestimate

the “uncivilized” Africans’ desire for their freedom. Melville shows the naïve thinking of Don Benito in believing that a group of people, given the opportunity to be free, will remain “tractable” and compliant. The crew, incapable of oppressing the African slave’s desire for freedom, makes a horrific error in judgment in allowing the Africans a taste of liberty aboard the ship. It is a mistake they pay for with their lives.

At the end of the story, there is a sense that the tale is not over, especially for Benito Cereno. Delano, as he has done throughout the story, relies on his rationalized good nature to look towards the future. “Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea” (74). He is virtually unaffected by the events he has witnessed. “You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?” (74). To which, cadaverous-like, Don Benito replies, “The negro” (74). In this simple statement, Melville conveys the absolute fear of the Spanish captain. These words haunt the reader as much as they haunt Benito Cereno. What does the captain mean by “The negro”? Delano narrates to the reader that “the dress, so precise and costly, worn by [Don Benito] on the day whose events have been narrated, had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one” (75). Even Babo’s act of dressing Don Benito in such a gallant and commanding dress seems daunting to Cereno. Though he was dressed as a captain, at no point during that day was Benito Cereno in charge of his ship. He had been outwitted by Babo, “the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat” (75). Delano can remain unaffected because the revolt has not yet come to the United States. When it does, in the form of the Civil War, it will forever change the state of the nation. Therefore, embedded within the final statement of captain Benito Cereno, is a warning to America: do not underestimate the intelligence and the drive of a people in search of their freedom. Freedom will come in the wake of violence and death.

Many critics attempt to rationalize a solid belief concerning Melville's stance on slavery. James E. Miller Jr. takes note of the moment in the story when Babo intimidates each of the Spanish sailors with the whiteness of Aranda's skeleton. Miller believes this is "one of the small incidents which testify to the depth of Babo's 'negro slave' resentment against the 'master' white race" (158-59). There is more to this than simply "negro slave resentment" towards whites. Miller does not take into account Babo's occupation in Senegal. "[P]oor Babo here, in his own land, was only a poor slave; a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's" (19). Babo was a slave prior to the Spaniards taking him. This comment seems to show that the two cultures are not so different in social practices. Both the African culture and the white European culture utilize the institution of slavery. Melville does not make it apparent that the whites here are the outright enemy. Nor is the text, as John Haegert believes it to be, a clear "embodiment of Melville's anti-slavery sentiment" (22). To make such a clear and open statement would be to expose himself to much criticism in a time when there was no clear moral stance on slavery. If "Benito Cereno" is neither a text that wholly supports the slave trade nor condemns it, we must look at the text from a different perspective, one that better fits the time period in which it was written.

Melville's ambiguity in determining who is wrong and who is right mirrors the uncertainty of the time itself. On one hand, the slave revolt resulted in the murder of many men, both Spanish and African; yet can one truly blame the African slaves for wanting their freedom? In this dichotomy lies the problem. In his still pertinent discussion of nineteenth-century American literature, F. O. Matthiessen writes, "The [...] impression is that good and evil can be inextricably and confusingly intermingled—a state that was to be one of Melville's chief sources of ambiguity" (384). Matthiessen is correct in that, for critics, "Benito Cereno" will remain an ambiguous text concerning Melville's stance on slavery; however, one cannot help but hear the echo of a line from *Typee*, in which Melville comments on the Euro-American Christian missionary crusades. He states, "how we sympa-

these for the unhappy victims, and with what horror do we regard the diabolical heathens, who, after all, have but avenged the unprovoked injuries which they have received" (27). Though the Civil War was not something foreseen at the beginning of the slave trade, there were clear indications that potential problems could arise along the way. Did America simply ignore these signs or was it ignorant of them? In "Benito Cereno," Melville does not explicitly suggest any right or wrong answers towards the slave trade. He allows his reader to make judgments based upon the situations and circumstances of Delano, Don Benito, and the African slaves. This is what allows "Benito Cereno" to be so widely interpreted even today. Melville places the responsibility on the reader to come up with the answers. He merely provides the questions.

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