

Questioning Motives in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*

Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* is a novella that depicts Captain Amasa Delano's experience aboard the Spanish slave ship, the *San Dominick*. Delano, the captain of his own sealing ship the *Bachelor's Delight*, encounters the slave ship in distress off the coast of Chile in 1799. Delano allegedly falls for the façade the slaves are conjuring on the *San Dominick* because in actuality they have taken over and killed much of the Spanish crew. Various scholars in the field have attempted to understand why it was so easy for Delano to fall for the slaves' guise. They attribute Delano's gullibility to his blatant racism; that his rationalization of the events on the *San Dominick* is due to his underestimation of the capabilities of the African slaves. I, however, dismiss these claims of Delano's naiveté. I argue that Delano is aware that the occupants of the *San Dominick* are putting up a façade. He plays along with this narrative while he evaluates the situation. While it appears his time on the *San Dominick* is full of uncertainty, the excuses he offers fall flat, which summon questions of his true intentions. I believe that Delano is aware that Benito Cereno, the captain of the *San Dominick*, has lost control of his ship, though perhaps he does not know exactly how. He plays the role of the benevolent, chauvinistic American, but ultimately, he is deciding how he can profit from the slave ship. This can be seen through the work of scholars in the field that fall short of this conclusion, the historical context of the novella, Delano's actions, and the unreliability of the narrator.

Scholars of *Benito Cereno* have varying opinions of Delano, yet most attribute his apparent ignorance to his racism or sheer stupidity. William Bartley, in his piece, "'The Creature of His Own Tasteful Hands': Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and the 'Empire of Might,'" believes Delano is both of these things. Bartley dismisses Delano completely, claiming that Delano "gradually emerges as a moral imbecile of a historically recognizable and culturally

unexceptional type” (447). Bartley then continues to claim that while Delano does notice “certain incongruities on the ship, he will suspect Cereno a “horrible Spaniard” [BC, p. 7], before he will suspect African slaves. He simply cannot credit the slaves with a conspiratorial, vengeful and accordingly human intelligence” (447). By calling Delano an “imbecile,” Bartley is incredibly shortsighted. He chooses to acknowledge common stereotypes toward African slaves, but not those of capitalistic, greedy Americans of the era. Delano can easily be evaluating his situation to attain the most personal gain, as he is a sealer profiting off of the ocean. Why would his potential gain only be limited to what is beneath the ocean’s surface? Bartley chooses to attribute Delano’s actions to stereotypical racism yet refuses to consider stereotypes that may apply to Delano’s position in the novel as well.

Sandra A. Zagarell shares similar sentiments of Delano’s racism and ignorance but gives him a bit more credit. In her piece, “Reenvisioning America: Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” she states that it is “Delano’s sentimental racism, which prevents him from perceiving the blacks’ hatred of slavery, and his expansionist mentality of chauvinism are only two of his ideology’s many components: the code of gentility, debased romanticism, and sensational melodrama are developed with equal care” (129). I agree with many of these claims about Delano’s ideology, and will even borrow from them to support my argument, but again, I do not believe that Delano was blinded by his racism and chauvinism. In fact, I believe that he uses common racist sentiments to misplace his true intentions as he debates them. He evaluates the situation on the *San Dominick*, debating whether he should favor his American gentility or his capitalistic tendencies to take over the ship and profit from it. There is a possibility that he is much more clever and deceitful than we are led to believe, therefore we cannot dismiss Delano as simply a racist imbecile without a second thought.

John C. Havard takes these sentiments against Delano a bit deeper in his piece “Ironizing Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ as Critique of Hispanicist Exceptionalism.” Havard cites the novella, claiming that it is reflective of the historical prejudices toward Spain which is the crux of his argument that Delano “self-reflexively imagines himself against Cereno as a US American who is particularly well-fitted for a managerial role in an emergently capitalist, liberal-democratic world” (128). He then embarks on an analysis of the novella in relation to Delano’s cosmopolitanism, claiming it reflects this Hispanicism. Havard defines Hispanicism in Melville’s work by applying it to Delano’s “imperialist beliefs that Hispanophone peoples... were racially incapacitated for the duties of sovereignty” (Havard 128-129). While Havard offers good observations, I think his piece falls short. He is identifying this as a “capitalist, liberal-democratic world,” yet he is failing to see how Delano’s motivations could be impacted by this.

Like many other scholars, Havard believes Delano cannot see anything past his Hispanicism. He is claiming that Delano’s cosmopolitanism allows him to navigate the ship with its diverse inhabitants and the novella overall questions identity categories. While this discourse is off the mark on Delano’s intentions, it is still fruitful to this argument. Havard raises the point that Delano clearly does not trust Cereno to captain the *San Dominick*, which supports my argument that Delano wishes to take control of this ship for personal gain. Delano acknowledges that Cereno is “not fit to be entrusted with the ship” as he is sickly and non-authoritative. At one point, Delano considers “withdrawing the command from him” in favor of Delano’s second mate (Melville 26). It is important to note that Delano’s second in command has ties to piracy. Later in the novella when Delano is sending his crew to overtake the *San Dominick*, he appoints this man to lead the raid. Delano refers to him as his “chief mate – an athletic and resolute man, who had

been a privateer's man, and, as his enemies whispered, a pirate – to head the party” (Melville 59). The inclusion of this detail in itself is worthy of suspicion. With consideration of Havard's views on Delano's Hispanicism, it is not a stretch to believe that Delano would consider himself and his crew to be worthier of the *San Dominick* and its contents. Zagarell shares these suspicions, as she traces the real Delano's associations with piracy, stating that “Melville suggests guilt by association to establish a definite tie between the American captain and the practice of piracy” (141). If he was considering sending his second in command, a pirate, to control the ship, would that not point to Delano's own pirate-like need to profit off of Cereno's ship?

In addition to Delano's chief mate being linked to piracy, the real American sea captain Amasa Delano had ties to piracy as well. Melville drew inspiration from the real Delano's book *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World*. The real Delano wrote this novel with hopes to educate the public on traversing the ocean and in Chapter 18, he discusses his experience on his ship *Perseverance* and their encounter with the Spanish slave ship *Tryal*. These ships were replaced with the names the *Bachelor's Delight* and the *San Dominick* respectively in Melville's novella. Melville was influenced to write his novella based on this chapter in the real Delano's book, therefore it is valid to consider biographical information in this analysis. I believe it is important to examine the character of the real Delano, as this could be reflective of Melville's fictional Delano.

The real Delano is further explored by scholars Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie in their piece “Aftermath: Captain Delano's Claim Against *Benito Cereno*.” They compare Melville's novel with archival documents from the Archivo Nacional of Santiago de Chile about the incident on the *Tryal*. Their piece serves as an exposé to the real Delano's character, as they

acknowledge scholarly negligence to question the fictional Delano's motives. However, this piece fails to offer any new discourse, rather it is a call for scholars to reexamine previous interpretations of Delano's actions. Therefore, I will use historical and biographical information from Stuckey and Leslie's article to heed their call and question Delano's dubious intentions. Stuckey and Leslie detail Delano's encounters with the slave trade prior to his encounter with the *Tryal*, as they claim he believed "slaves were commodities of exchange, like calico and crockery, and should be exploited as such" (269). They draw from his novel in which he is quoted for trading cheap items for great riches with indigenous peoples of New Guinea, Ceram, Goram, and other isles in the vicinity. This furthers Havard's thoughts on Delano's imperialism and Hispanicism, as he took advantage of those he feels are inferior to himself. If he has no qualms taking advantage of indigenous people, it is not a stretch that he would attempt to take advantage of a Spaniard he felt to be inferior as well.

Leslie and Stuckey continue to deface Delano's character, as they detail an altercation between Delano and Cereno following the incident on the *Tryal*. Delano claimed that Cereno promised him half of the cargo and all of the slaves on the *Tryal*, yet Cereno claimed he made this agreement in a fragile mental state, and therefore it should be invalidated. Leslie and Stuckey claim that "Delano's version of his agreement with *Benito Cereno*, offered after Don Benito proposed securing the testimony of the imprisoned men, appears to be a fabrication" (271). Delano's desperation to profit from the *Tryal* is attributed to the failure of his voyage on the *Perseverance*, as they had not accumulated enough pelts to be financially successful. One of Delano's crewmembers is cited for saying he "did not know whether having wasted the voyage, the captain would practice piracy in order to meet the expenses of the expedition" (Leslie and Stuckey 271). If Delano had piratical inclinations, the *Tryal* would be the perfect target to

overtake for profit. Leslie and Stuckey provide evidence that Delano was a suspected pirate, he took advantage of those he believed to be inferior to himself, and he was willing to fabricate stories for financial profit. This offers grounds to question the fictional Delano's motivations if the man this character is modeled after had self-serving and immoral aims.

These revelations about the real Delano's character aboard the *Tryal* prompt comparison with the fictional Delano's actions in the novella. Keeping this in mind, we can call the fictional Delano's motives into question. His alleged suspicion and in turn, rationalization of the events he witnesses, are all the more dubious. This brings me to the opening scene of the novel. The narrator implies that the *San Dominick* has an "effect of enchantment" that the "unreal" ship has, with "strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave." The narrator then goes on to claim that Delano is under this influence, and his mind is "heightened" with "staid scrutiny" on what "might have seemed unusual" (Melville 6). This part of Melville's narrative, which occurs as Delano is boarding the ship, is the best proof of my argument from the text itself. It is difficult to believe that under these circumstances, Delano was completely oblivious. Therefore, I believe Delano himself is putting up a façade. If the ship is supposed to receive back what it gives, then because they are emitting a front they will in turn be faced with one. This correlates with the real Delano's fabrication of events in his version of what happened on the *Tryal*. Throughout the novel, Delano offers phony excuses and rationalizations of Cereno and the slaves' actions on the ship. He is constantly faced with suspicious activity from those on the *San Dominick*, for example, he wonders whether "the man [Cereno] was an imposter. Some lowborn adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee" or "that possibly master and man [Cereno and his slave Babo], for some unknown purpose, were acting out... some juggling play before him" (Melville

44). Each time Delano raises suspicions, he quickly dismisses them as “notion[s] of whimsy” (Melville 44). These suspicions and dismissals are too sudden to be sincere, and in light of the real Delano’s tendency to fabricate events for his benefit, it would not be a stretch to believe these alleged qualms are made up.

Additionally, looking to the historical context regarding the 18th-century slave trade, it is unlikely Delano would believe the Spanish were still in control of the ship. We can examine slave narratives of the era to see the conditions common on these ships in contrast to the situation on the *San Dominick*. Former slave, Olaudah Equiano, writes about his experience coming to the Americas from his home in present-day Nigeria during the 18th century, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. He describes conditions slavers forced upon them to ensure the prevention of rebellion or suicide attempts from the slaves. When first boarding the ship, Equiano witnesses “a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow” and eventually was chained with all of the other slaves below deck, with “the stench of the hold... so intolerably loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time... but now that the whole ship’s cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential” (Equiano 2-3). He was even whipped at one point for refusing to eat. Conditions such as these would have been familiar to Delano, as he was traveling the seas not long after Equiano was transported to America on a slave ship. They would have been in harbors Delano was sailing out of. While Delano decides that “nothing more relaxes good order than misery” while he observes the laxity of the Spanish authority over the slaves, he should have been aware of the norms Equiano experienced and the frequency of slave mutiny (Melville 8). Furthermore, later in the novella Delano witnesses a black boy struck a Spanish boy and Delano watches “in amazement” as Cereno does not punish the black boy (Melville 16).

Given the historical context, there is no possibility of something like this going unaddressed, especially in comparison to Equiano being lashed for merely refusing to eat. The slaves would not be able to have complete free roam of the ship either, and this transition from being chained below deck for the entirety of a voyage is too extreme. This, in addition to Delano's rationalizations, then lead to the only logical conclusion; I propose he was aware of the situation on the *San Dominick* the entire time, but only offers these alleged suspicions to feign ignorance.

Delano continues with this façade until the conclusion of the novel when his true, piratical intentions are revealed. When Cereno jumps into Delano's boat in attempts to escape the *San Dominick*, Delano has no choice but to be transparent with his capitalistic motivations. Delano's departure from the *San Dominick* and alleged realization of the slaves' mutiny, ties back to when he first boarded the ship. The façade the ship and its inhabitants are putting up falls, as Delano is "glancing up toward the *San Dominick*, Captain Delano, now with the scales dropped from his eyes, saw the Negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" (Melville 58). The fronts on both sides are down, and reality has set in. With the slaves revealing their revolt, Delano reveals his true intentions. He rallies his men to take the *San Dominick* and its cargo, claiming that "no small part should be theirs" despite the fact that "Don Benito entreated the American not to give chase, either with ship or boat; for the Negroes had already proved themselves such desperadoes" (Melville 59). Delano quickly jumps from being the *San Dominick*'s savior to cashing out on its cargo. This drastic change of intentions is difficult to believe and makes me question the seemingly agreed-upon notion of Delano's ignorance in scholarly discourse. The narrator, who centers the narrative on Delano, has also fallen victim to this front. I do not believe it can be trusted. The rationalizations included

in the narrative easily could have been drawn from Delano's first-hand account from the deposition.

Citing the third-person limited narrator would be a way to deface the argument that Delano is conscious of the slave's façade. One would be inclined to trust the narrator of the story to be presenting the facts, that Delano is merely a racist or an imbecile. However, I do not believe this narrator can be trusted. The inclusion of the extracts at the end of the narrative, lead me to believe so. I believe the narrator has also fallen victim to Delano's false motivations. The narrative stops abruptly after the slaves are defeated on the *San Dominick* and Cereno is taken in by the *Bachelor's Delight*. The narrator then switches directions by inserting "the following extracts, translated from one of the official Spanish documents, will, it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative, as well as, in the first place, reveal the true port of departure and true history of the *San Dominick's* voyage" (Melville 61). The narrator is claiming that the documents will support what happened on the *San Dominick*, which means that they concede to Delano and Cereno's point of view. This reliance upon the deposition to make sense of the events clearly shows the narrator's favor and trust in Delano's side of the story. The use of a biased deposition to support and further clarify the narrator's depiction of the event leads me to believe that the narrator is also biased toward Delano's claims.

The deposition and the narrator are both biased in favor of Delano's perspective on events that occur on the *San Dominick*. The deposition uses favorable adjectives toward Delano, such as his "friendly offers" and "the generous Captain Amasa Delano" (Melville 69). We can see this similar bias through our introduction to Delano's character. The narrator chooses to say that he is "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature" and that "such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception"

(Melville 3). This characterization is too similar to that of the deposition, which in itself is supporting a morally corrupt society at the time. Therefore, I claim that the presence of this third-person limited narrator with clear favorability toward Delano means we cannot trust his alleged rationalization of what is occurring on the ship. They easily could have been taken from Delano's own deposition of his experience on the ship, which we have established could be embellished. This leaves room for Delano's hidden motives and acknowledgment of what is actually occurring on the ship. This then sets off a chain reaction, and because the narrator has a tainted perspective, all who read the novella will share in it. This includes all of the scholars who dismiss the possibility of his ulterior motives, attributing his actions to racism and stupidity.

Having established this bias towards Delano, it is important to explore the unreliability of this narrator. Wayne C. Booth, an American literary critic, examines and classifies what makes a narrator unreliable in his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth acknowledges that it is "almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible" which makes this argument difficult to make about Melville's work (160). Despite this, Booth says "sometimes explicit corroborating or conflicting testimony makes the inference easy" (160). This explicit corroboration is present in *Benito Cereno*. By including the deposition, the narrator is corroborating the version of the story that Cereno and Delano offer. There is no inclusion or reference to the slave's perspective. It is only corroborating one version of the story: Delano and Cereno's experience.

The choice to center the narrative around Delano's, rather than Cereno or even Cereno's slave, Babo, further supports this favorability and continues to classify this narrator as unreliable by Booth's definition. Booth concludes that "in practice, no author ever manages to create a work which shows complete impartiality... Even among characters of equal moral, intellectual,

or aesthetic worth, all authors inevitably take sides. A given work will be "about" a character or set of characters." (78). While Booth is discussing authorial choices here, I think it applies to the narrator as well. The narrator chose to center this narrative around Delano, among all of the people involved in the mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*. Cereno or Babo's perspective would have been more effective to tell this story, as they were present from start to finish. Despite this, the narrator still chose Delano.

Having an unreliable narrator communicate this tale to the audience, in addition to focusing the narrative around the perspective of a self-serving individual such as Delano, is dangerous to readers. Booth shares this belief as he cites "the history of unreliable narrators from *Garagantua* to *Lolita* is in fact full of traps for the unsuspecting reader, some of them not particularly harmful but some of them crippling or even fatal" (239). This novel is full of traps that Booth mentions. Readers are confined by Delano's perspective, which is the perspective of a racist, classist, and probable pirate as we have seen through examining both the text and the work of other scholars in analyzing this novella. While a modern audience can see the flaws in Delano's biases, *Benito Cereno* was originally published in 1855. By choosing a man like Delano to be the lauded "hero" of the story, it perpetuated the damaging values that Delano stands for in Melville's time. This bias affects modern readers today, tricking them into believing Delano to be a harmless fool when he was really looking to profit from the *San Dominick* through the lens of my interpretation. While some may believe this is over-analyzing the text, it is a logical conclusion to draw using works of scholars in the field, the text itself, the real Delano's links to piracy, and historical context for the time. Readers need to refuse to blindly accept the perspective a narrator is offering and to seek potential hidden motives of the main characters.

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