

ANALYSIS

Benito Cereno (1855)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“The noblest short story in American literature’.”

Edward J. O’Brien, ed.
Twenty-Five Finest Short Stories
(New York 1931)

“‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’ Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*”

Ralph Ellison
epigraph, *Invisible Man* (1952)

“The suspense that hints at impending evil and casts an ambiguous light on past incidents, Captain Delano’s suspicions of the presence of evil for which he can find no explanation, the isolation and fear of Benito Cereno, who is helpless to speak out against his captor—these are the means by which Melville transforms a true account into a work of art....

Captain Delano, while brave and resourceful, is prone to speculation, doubts, and suspicions stimulated by the contradictory behavior of Benito Cereno; his main concern is to fathom the mystery surrounding Cereno’s extraordinary behavior and the ambiguous incidents that take place. Delano’s point of view is central in the novel.... Delano, being an outsider, knows nothing of the real situation on board the *San Dominick*. His is the ‘innocent eye’ on which impressions are made by what he sees much as they are on James’s governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. Furthermore, Captain Delano is characterized as ‘a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature’....

The carved stern piece dominated by the figure of a masked satyr pinioning with his foot another masked figure suggests hidden mystery. This figure is of course the symbol of Babo’s mastery over the weak and frightened Cereno. They are masked, since ostensibly Babo is Cereno’s servant; he plays the role to delude Delano and ward off suspicions and yet have a legitimate reason for staying close to Cereno at all times. The masking also suggests Delano’s inability to see through Babo’s masquerade; until Babo attacks Cereno in the whale boat, Delano directs all his suspicions and doubts toward Cereno. Only with that act of violence is Babo’s mask ripped off and his villainy revealed.”

Charles G. Hoffmann
“The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville”
The South Atlantic Quarterly 52 (July 1953) 414-30

“This has its origin in the...deposition of a New England sea captain, Amasa Delano. Melville portrays him as a typically innocent American who, like the witnesses in *The Marble Faun* or in the novels of James, finds himself inadvertently drawn into the evils of the old world. Proceeding by indirection, through his naïve point of view, we board the drifting Spanish craft, a slave ship which resembles a whitewashed monastery or a dilapidated chateau.... As it transpires, with the retarded impact of a ‘rush from darkness to light,’ the slaves have revolted and slaughtered the crew; and Babo, who is the ringleader of the revolt, by keeping the razor at his master’s throat, keeps him from undeceiving Captain Delano.... Melville, the exponent of brotherhood among races, seems ready to concede that life is a blood-feud: ‘Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come’.”

Harry Levin
The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville
(Knopf/Vintage 1958) 189-90

“With the revival of Melville, *Benito Cereno* was placed very high... To John Freeman, ‘a flaming instance of the author’s pure genius.’ In the opinion of Carl Van Doren, ‘it equals the best of Conrad in the weight of its drama and the skill of its unfolding.’ These are judgments of the 1920’s; fuller criticism was delayed until the Forties. The two full analyses of *Benito Cereno*, by Rosalie Feltenstein and by Stanley T. Williams, agree with the earlier verdict; both are tributes to Melville’s artistry. Miss Feltenstein demonstrates ‘the architectural skill with which the story is constructed,’ declaring that ‘there is not one careless, useless, weak, or redundant touch in the whole tale.’ Professor Williams goes as far, or farther: ‘Only now are we beginning to realize the perfection of its form and the subtleties of its insights. It is even defensible to prefer *Benito Cereno* to *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*....”

Its deepest effects are muted. It has not the life nor the luminescence of *Moby-Dick*. Cereno is not Ahab, nor Delano, Ishmael--and Babo is smaller than the whale.... But after *Moby-Dick* the tale of *Benito Cereno* is Melville’s most fully achieved piece of writing.”

Richard Harter Fogle
“*Benito Cereno*”
Melville's Shorter Tales
(U of Oklahoma 1960)

“In the present critical interest in Melville’s stories, none of them except *Billy Budd* has been so much argued about as *Benito Cereno*....one of the most exciting mystery stories in the English language. Captain Delano thinks, at the end, that all the relevant facts have come out, but...time after time, while Delano is on board the Spanish ship, he thinks he has got to the heart of the matter. Then some new piece of unsettling evidence comes to his attention and he has to change course... He had—thus far—got everything wrong.... The innocent-seeming blacks are organized and disciplined murderers.... His ironic treatment of Delano invites us, indeed compels us, to go beyond the captain’s ‘evidence’ at every stage, in order that we may imagine the total truth.”

Willard Thorp, ed.
Afterword
Billy Budd and Other Tales by Herman Melville
(NAL/Signet 1961) 327-29

“Most of the action takes place aboard the *San Dominick*, a slave ship commanded by Benito Cereno. Although the captain appears to be in command, in reality he is the prisoner of the slaves, who are led by the Senegalese Babo, posing as Cereno’s valet. The narrative gradually unfolds through the consciousness of Captain Amasa Delano of Massachusetts, who, in his innocence, never more than suspects the evil he cannot quite plumb. Eventually the conspirators are undone and Babo put to death, but Cereno dies soon afterward. Melville based the story on facts taken from *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817) by Amasa Delano.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“*Benito Cereno* is one of the most brilliant technical performances among Melville’s works, maintaining almost to the end a constantly increasing suspense matched only by the three-day chase of the white whale at the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*. The story itself is quite simple, but Melville has caught and sharpened the high drama of the tale. An American Captain, Amasa Delano, aboard his *Bachelor's Delight* in the Chilean harbor of St. Maria in 1799, notices the erratic behavior of another ship, the *San Dominick*, when it enters the bay. Assuming the strange ship has suffered some misfortune and needs assistance, Captain Delano decides to board her and offer aid.

The bulk of the narrative is devoted to Captain Delano’s visit on the *San Dominick*, his sometimes cordial, sometimes rude reception by its ailing captain, Benito Cereno, his detailed observation of the strange and puzzling behavior of the large number of unrestricted Negroes aboard, his initial admiration for the Captain’s attentive aide, the Negro Babo, and his subsequent annoyance with him because of his refusal to leave Captain Delano alone with his master for a single moment. It is not until Captain Delano is preparing to return to his ship and Captain Benito Cereno suddenly leaps into the boat beside him that the

mystery is entirely cleared up. The Negroes, led by the 'devoted' aide, Babo, had revolted and held the whites aboard ship in subjection. They have practiced their nearly successful deception in the hope that an opportunity will arise to capture Delano's ship also.

In the following fight, Captain Delano succeeds in saving Benito and recapturing his ship for him. Melville concludes the story with some long extracts from the depositions at the subsequent trial of the Negroes--documents which summarize the history of the *San Dominick* before it sailed into the Chilean bay. A postscript relates the disposition of the Negroes at the trial and the final fate of Benito. The matter-of-fact legal style of the depositions, contrasting sharply with the preceding highly dramatic style, shows Melville in perfect command of his technique: the mystery has aroused a curiosity which only the 'facts' of the testimony will satisfy.

The suspense evoked by *Benito Cereno* is compounded not only of a puzzling series of events aboard the *San Dominick* but also of Captain Delano's alternating suspicion and understanding. At some point in the story, the reader's suspicions rise above those of the American Captain's and refuse to be dissipated by the intricate reasoning with which he destroys his own doubts. The initial question--what will happen?--is gradually shifted: when will Captain Delano finally understand that something is amiss aboard the *San Dominick*? Gradually the American Captain is impressed on the reader's engrossed consciousness as a character of almost superhuman innocence.

For Melville's drama of evil emerges in the old familiar patterns. And Captain Delano is his maskless man, a man frank and sincere in his basic nature, quick with his help for others, kind and forgiving out of a spontaneously generous heart--but not so naive in his understanding of the human scene as to be unable, when convinced of the necessity, to cope with evil. His is a practical virtue, neither too much nor too little of this world. At least so it turns out. For the whole length of the story, however, the issue is uncertain as Delano's good nature seems to render him incapable of distinguishing innocence from its disguise.

Captain Amasa Delano, from Duxbury, Massachusetts, is Melville's Western Man, with all of his most noble traits. He is endowed with a 'singularly undistrustful good nature, 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.' Melville poses a question which he declines at the outset to answer: 'Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine.' As always in Melville, the crucial question revolves about the balance of *heart* and *mind*. An imbalance, as in Ahab or Billy Budd, courts disaster. A perfect balance, as in Jack Chase, achieves the ideal. Captain Delano may seem at first to suffer from an excess of the one and a deficiency of the other--but in the showdown, when action is crucial, he acts.

It is Captain Delano's basic good nature and generous heart which impel him when he first sights the crippled ship to offer his assistance, and it is these same noble traits which force him to forgive so easily the apparently ungrateful and even rude recipients of his aid. Numerous small incidents momentarily arouse the suspicions of Captain Delano, but he invariably and ingeniously lulls the suspicions to rest. Even when Captain Benito Cereno is shaved, at his Negro's reminder, during Delano's visit in the middle of the day, and trembles so violently that the 'servant' Babo draws blood, the serene American Captain cannot yet sustain his suspicions. He reflects--'But then, what could be the object of enacting this play of the barber before him? At last, regarding the notion as a whimsy, insensibly suggested, perhaps, by the theatrical aspect of Don Benito in his harlequin ensign, Captain Delano speedily banished it.' Captain Delano is constantly seeking a rational explanation for the evil he fleetingly imagines, and when he can find none, he dismisses the suspicion as 'whimsy.'

In the exciting climax of the story, when first Don Benito Cereno and next Babo leap into Captain Delano's boat before it can part from the crippled ship, Delano can still not sense the presence of evil, and for a moment it appears that he will never awaken to the distraught state of affairs aboard the *San Dominick*. But finally he spots Babo in the boat with a dagger at his master's heart: 'That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating, in unanticipated clearness, his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the

entire past voyage of the *San Dominick*. Captain Delano's insight has the speed and scope of a sudden vision as he sees in a flash behind the multitudinous masks of innocence which have so long and dangerously betrayed him: 'Captain Delano, now with 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.'

As the discarding of the 'masks' confirms his insight, Captain Delano acts--and acts swiftly and positively. Though reluctant to recognize evil, he is not slow to confront it; though hesitant in naming it, he does not hesitate to cope with it. Unlike either Ahab or Billy Budd, Captain Delano can deal with evil in a practical and effective manner, for in him mind and heart are held in balance. His great and generous heart, although it leads him to near disaster, does not push him over the edge. He releases Don Benito, binds Babo, picks up the other Spanish sailors who have leaped from their captivity, and, when he returns to his ship, dispatches a whaling boat in successful pursuit of the fleeing *San Dominick*. By this immediate and courageous action Captain Delano demonstrates that his notable generosity is kept within 'human' bounds by a strong, instinctive sense of realism.

If Captain Delano is the maskless man of the tale, Benito Cereno is the subtly masked man, presenting one face to society, another to himself--neither of which, as he perhaps recognizes subconsciously, is the true Don Benito. In his occasional and gloomy glimpses into his own dark interior, he is like Pierre peering at times into his own deep soul; in his unwillingness to confront evil and his final withdrawal to a monastery, he is like Billy Budd responding whimsically as a child to the world's sin.

Benito Cereno contrasts markedly with Amasa Delano, captain from the New World of America. His ship is no *Bachelor's Delight* (like Delano's) but the stately reminder of the past, the *San Dominick*. Don Benito himself is a Spanish Catholic, both his country and his religion steeped in compelling traditions. In his weakness in the face of danger and in his final withdrawal from life, Don Benito seems to be the representative of a proud but nearly exhausted civilization, one on the brink of disintegration and decay. His inability to cope with the Negroes is not so much a failure of intellect or strength as a failure of will. Though the victim of black evil, Don Benito seems himself to emanate a darkness of his own.

Don Benito's outermost mask, removed only by his leap into Captain Delano's boat, is forced upon him by his captors. Beneath this mask lies the mask of innocence. When Captain Delano confesses that he at first believed, when Don Benito leaped, that Benito was signaling the launching of a plot against Delano and his crew, Don Benito replies: 'You were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose.' Innocent of the plot imagined by Captain Delano--Don Benito certainly was. But he is not, as he says, an innocent man; indeed, the experience brings to him an acute sense of his heritage of guilt. In Babo, who appears symbolically as his double (they are of the same age, have many similar characteristics), Don Benito vividly perceives his own--and man's--evil, and the knowledge undoes him.

His irrational fear, compounded in part of an insane hate, causes him when he is rescued by Captain Delano to refuse to come on deck of the *Bachelor's Delight* until the securely bound Babo is removed from sight, and he refuses ever after, even at the trial, to endure the presence of the Negro. He carefully notes in his deposition the reversal of the barbarism, the attack on the blacks (after they have been captured and shackled) by the Spanish sailors--a number were killed, others saved by Captain Delano just as the razor was aimed at the throat, the dagger at the heart.

This reversal impresses clearly on Don Benito the universality of the savage impulse. And in the closing lines of the story, he reveals his inability to accept the human fate. When Captain Delano cries out to Don Benito to forget--'See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves'--Don Benito quietly replies: 'Because they have no memory...because they are not human.' Captain Delano asks Don Benito the cause of his dejection, and receives in simply reply: 'The negro.' In his withdrawal and subsequent death, Don Benito deliberately severs his link in the common human chain: he refuses any longer to bear the responsibility of his *humanhood*.

Among the rebelling Negroes, two provide the necessary leadership--Babo the intellect, Atufal the brute strength. It is Babo who not only has masterminded the mutiny but also has conceived the fantastic plot of deceiving Captain Delano as to the true state of affairs aboard the *San Dominick*. Babo is a colored confidence man, a bit more sinister, perhaps, but reveling like the common racketeer in an ingenious and complicated plot fiendishly calculated to hurt as well as to fleece. Babo obviously enjoys evil for itself alone. This perverted joy is most clearly demonstrated in the relish with which he murders Don Benito's friend, Don Alexandro Aranda, the owner of the slaves on board, and mounts his bleached skeleton in place of the figure of Christopher Columbus as the *San Dominick's* figurehead. With this constant reminder of his cruelty on conspicuous display, Babo 'teases' the remnant of the Spanish crew and Don Benito about the whiteness of the skeleton. One by one, he asks each sailor whether he cannot affirm, from the whiteness of the bones, that they belong to a white man. This is but one of several small incidents which testify to the depth of Babo's 'negro slave' resentment against the 'master' white race.

Babo's silent accomplice, the magnificently built Atufal, is another reminder of the seething rebelliousness of the black man. Once a chief of his tribe in Africa, he has had thrust upon him the indignities of slavery by men physically inferior who, ironically, espouse a religion of charity and love. Though the cruelties of the Negroes are extreme, they are not without precedents among white men, and they well up spontaneously from a confusion of fear and hate only dimly (if at all) understood by the perpetrators. But Babo and his followers are clever enough to understand that evil is most likely to succeed when it masquerades as innocence: they are as diligent in conceiving their naive drama of deception as they are in executing their acts of violence.

In *Benito Cereno* Melville uses the drama of the masks to generate suspense. The deceptions in this story in a real sense are the story, for the deceptions capture the imagination of author and reader. The fate of the characters at the end is in part a dramatic reflection of their attitudes. Captain Delano, the maskless man, endures, and will continue his direct and frank confrontation of life. The clever Babo, once deprived of his ingenious mask, refuses to speak a word either at his trial or on any other occasion; but his severed head, 'that hive of subtlety,' is displayed in public where it meets, 'unabashed, the gaze of the whites.' And Benito Cereno, three months after the trial, is borne from his monastery on a bear as he makes the ultimate withdrawal from the human scene. Captain Delano welcomes life; Benito Cereno welcomes death; Babo seems to scoff defiantly at both."

James E. Miller, Jr.
A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville
(Noonday 1962) 152-59

"The ghostly Benito Cereno captains a ship which is continually called unreal and enchanted. The *San Dominick* is in fact a ghost ship, the floating coffin and tomb of the ghost of Charles V.... Since in Cereno 'was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal.' He serves as a well-chosen counterpart for the Holy Roman Emperor, who likewise functions as a well-chosen symbol of all authority on this earth.... Each historical allusion in the story refers to the overthrow or fading of some particular worldly power. Melville compares Cereno to James I... Delano compares Cereno's 'Christian' steward to George III, loser of both the American colonies and of his own sanity.

A most significant parallel to the successful bloody rebellion of the slaves of the *San Dominick* is the successful bloody rebellion of the slaves on the island of Santo Domingo, a topic of great ante-bellum interest. Babo rises to power on the *San Dominick* in the year in which Toussaint L'Ouverture began extending his rule over all of Santo Domingo. Babo substitutes a skeleton for the *San Dominick's* 'proper figure-head--the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World...' After the Spaniards had exterminated most of the natives, Charles V made Santo Domingo the site of the first large-scale importation of slaves into the Western Hemisphere.... Melville's central concern is the cause of the overthrow of worldly power, seen in the disintegration of the Spanish empire, its emperor, and its symbolic descendant--Benito Cereno....

The Negroes of the *San Dominick* represent not only a malignant destructive force; they also represent the Church... At the last, Delano calls Cereno his savior.... There are several shadowy hints that the relationship between Cereno and Babo is like that between Christ and Judas.... Worldly power, as

represented by Benito Cereno, is blighted by 'the negro' that 'has cast such a shadow' upon him. Worldly power, as represented by Charles V, is 'blighted' by the 'dark shadow' of the Church. *Benito Cereno* equates the 'negro' and the Church by metaphors and by references to *The Cloister Life of Charles the Fifth* and to the *Bible*. Not only does the shadow of the 'negro' represent the shadow of the Church, but it is the heeding of the Church teaching, the confidence of Christianity, which destroys Cereno. He had confidence: he followed his leader and trusted the slaves. 'None wore fetters, because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him that they were all tractable.'...

By consistently maintaining his pose as the real commander of the *San Dominick*, Cereno saves Delano. Pierre's imitation of Christ had led to a 'pious imposture' in which he had become a kind of Christ. Benito Cereno's innocent imposture dramatizes another part not only of the imitation of Christ, but even of the role of the Savior. The question about Cereno is not, as it was with *Bartleby*, whether he 'is' Christ. He obviously is not Christ, but a Spanish sea captain. But as the ghost of Charles V, Cereno re-enacts the Emperor's abdication of the world and servitude to the Church. When he follows the leader of the Church, he, too, is betrayed by the men in whom he has confidence."

H. Bruce Franklin
The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology
(Stanford 1963) 136-150

"Melville's handling of his story—wherein the slow-witted, kindhearted American, Amasa Delano, boards the Spanish ship, explores it, talks with the Captain and his Negro 'servant' Babo, and departs without ever gaining more than the most fleeting impression of the truth—has been much praised.... Superficially, the resolution occurs when the narrative of the apparent situation—presented through the undiscerning eyes of Amasa Delano—is followed by the narrative of what had really happened, in the deposition made by the ailing Don Benito at the court in Lima, during the trial of the Negroes....

Melville's point in thus juxtaposing these two so different narrative modes and voices is this: *that neither version of the events contains the truth*. No reader doubts that Delano's version is false, that he got everything wrong way round...but we should recognize...that Benito Cereno's version is equally flawed by an inadequacy of perception—by those abstractions of the legal vocabulary that evade all contact with the blood and stuff of experience.... This is a curious instance of two wrongs making a right—or rather, of two falsehoods making a truth between them."

R. W. B. Lewis
"Melville After *Moby-Dick*: The Tales"
Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition
(Yale 1965)

"The story is indeed remarkable for its atmosphere and suggestion, its cumulative suspense, its horror, its pictorial qualities, its portrayal of contrasting types of character. Only in *Moby-Dick* perhaps is Melville's power more fully revealed."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States I, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1966) 1398

"One might cast most of the story's commentators into two camps: (1) those who read the tale as a powerful portrait of human depravity, with a sadistic Babo as the prime embodiment of evil, an obtuse Delano as Melville's figure of naïve optimism, and a doomed Cereno as his contrasting symbol of moral awareness; and (2) those who view the tale as a stern indictment of American slavery, complete with an amply prejudiced Delano, a guilt-ridden Cereno, and a sympathetic (or even heroic) Babo, driven to violence by an insufferable bondage.

The 'depravity' critics appear to have a preponderance of textual evidence on their side: certainly Babo's 'heroism' is difficult to document....Whatever Babo may represent for the Spanish captain, he was obviously meant to typify the 'malign' potential in every man.... He is the devilish symbol of *all* [human] depravity—black, white, and female.... In *Benito Cereno*, 'the negro' stands for all mankind. The author of such a firmly integrationist tale should scarcely be charged with racism....

One could hardly imagine views more akin to those of Delano [than in] Harriet Beecher Stowe's phenomenally popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published in book form in 1852: '[One day] the negro race, no longer despised and trodden down, will, perhaps, show forth some of the...most magnificent revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childish simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness'.... Apparently Melville was acquainted with contemporary arguments for black docility and sought to attack them by means of his naïve protagonist and bloodcurdling plot.... Melville did not, then, underline the barbarity of Babo's blacks out of a 'literary' disregard for racial implication, or a casual conflation of blackness with evil, but in direct response to the contemporary image of the Negro as more 'docile,' 'cheerful,' and 'harmonious' than other men.... Melville embedded in *Benito Cereno* considerable evidence of the fact that depravity is an essential attribute of all men rather than the private failing of an individual race.... Humanity is deprived to a man—and woman...

The actions of Delano's compatriots are in keeping with prior examples of white savagery... Suspicious of contemporary insistences on the moral superiority of whites, the sweet-temperedness of blacks, and the saving virtues of women, he apparently wished to underline the unity-in-depravity of all human beings... When it comes to his remarkable capacity for wrongdoing, man is all too undeniably 'one'.... One more fully appreciates the essential dichotomy of the tale: the opposition between Cereno, who knows what depravity men can do, and Delano, who owes his survival to his inability to perceive the truth.... Even after Cereno has testified and the facts of the *San Dominick* are known, Delano *still* refuses to 'see' what has been 'revealed' to him.... Granted a glimpse of naked human nature, Delano has nevertheless managed to keep his eyes shut....

Melville changed both the date of Delano's adventure and then name of Cereno's vessel so as to invoke the violent slave revolt which occurred on the isle of Santo Domingo in 1799.... In altering his source for literary purposes, Melville actually heightened the barbarity of Babo and company. According to Delano's *Narrative*, the blacks of the *Tryal* refrained from murder after Cereno signed a document promising them safe passage to Senegal.... Delano's chief limitation is not...a tendency to intellectual snobbery but a refusal to recognize the presence of 'malign evil in man'.... Delano's mistake nevertheless underlines not so much the bigotry of Americans as the calculated cruelty of mankind."

Allan Moore Emery
"The Topicality of Depravity in *Benito Cereno*"
American Literature 55.3 (October 1983)

"The outbreak of revolution in 1790 produced a flood of white planter refugees [from Haiti] to the United States, some 10,000 in 1793 alone, most of them carrying both slaves and tales of terror to the South. Thereafter, especially in the wake of Nat Turner's bloody uprising in 1831 and the emancipation of slaves in British Jamaica in the same year, Haiti came to seem the fearful precursor of black rebellion throughout the New World. When Melville altered the date of Amasa Delano's encounter with Benito Cereno from 1805 to 1799, he accentuated the fact that his tale belonged to the age of democratic revolution, in particular the period of violent struggle leading Haitian independence presided over by the heroic black general Toussaint L'Ouverture.... From the mid-1840s on, claims had been made by Frederick Douglass and others that Haiti would be annexed to protect American (slave) interests....

Lasting paranoia among slaveholders about abolitionist responsibility for slave unrest...continually referred back to San Domingo.... Implicit in the assumption of abolitionist conspiracy, of course, is a doubt of the slaves' own ability to organize and carry out a revolt, a doubt contradicted by any of the slave revolutionaries Melville might have had in mind—by Toussaint, by Desalines, by Nat Turner, by Cinque (the notorious leader of the revolt aboard the slave ship *Amistad*), and by Mure, the original of his own Babo.... The thirty-nine men from the Santa Maria Columbus left at the north coast base of Navidad on Hispaniola in 1492 were massacred by the natives after quarreling over gold and Indian women; on his second voyage in 1494 Columbus himself took command, suppressed an Indian uprising, and authorized an enslavement of Indians to work in the gold fields that was destined to destroy—by some estimates—close to one million natives within fifteen years.... The end of slavery in the British West Indies in 1833 and in the Dutch and French Islands in 1848 left the United States more and more an anomaly...

Delano...may portray the stock Yankee traveler in plantation fiction, delighted by the warm patriarchal bond between the loyal, minstrel-like slave and his languid master... Recognizing that 'slavery breeds ugly passions in man' but banishing from mind the significance of that realization, Delano is a virtual embodiment of repression, not simply in the sense that he puts down the revolt aboard the *San Dominick* and thereby restores authority that has been overturned, but also in the sense that his refusal to understand the 'shadow' of the Negro that has descended upon Benito Cereno is itself a psychologically and politically repressive act....

Melville's portrayal of Babo would have aroused memories of notorious American slave rebels like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, all of them in one faction of the public mind artful and vicious men prompted to their deeds by madness... Turner in particular was perceived to be deranged, the victim of apocalyptic hallucinations. In contrast, Babo is a heroic figure—though full of that 'art and cunning' the real Delano attributed to all African slaves.... His masquerade of devotion to Benito Cereno concisely portrays the complexly layered qualities of rebellion and submission—of 'Nat' and 'Sambo' roles—that historians have detected among the accounts of slave behavior.... The 'play of the barber' compresses Delano's blind innocence, Cereno's spiritual fright, and Babo's extraordinary mastery of the scene's props and actors into a nightmare pantomime symbolic of the revenge of New World slaves upon their debilitated masters....a scene defined by symbols of Spain's violent Catholic history."

Eric J. Sundquist
"Benito Cereno and New World Slavery"
Reconstructing American Literary History
ed. Sacvan Bercovitch
(Harvard 1986)

"Melville once again returns to the paradox of the likable criminal, this time to gauge the distortions of perspective that result when the Conventional sensibility pities black criminals masquerading as obsequious slaves. Pity is misdirected right up to the crucial moment, for it is not until the piratical Babo leaps into his departing boat and tries to stab Benito Cereno that Delano discovers his mistake.... Until Babo showed his true identity, Delano had regarded Benito Cereno as a murderous pirate. Ironically, then, it is the wicked Babo, not Delano's beloved Providence, that brings about the climactic revelation."

David S. Reynolds
*Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*
(Harvard 1989) 298

"[Richard] Wright may be seen as a Melvillian, in that *Benito Cereno* forms a kind of prediction of *Native Son*, that is, with Babo predicting Bigger Thomas.... Through Amasa Delano, Melville 'had itemized every single belief cherished by an advanced civilization...about a backward people and then one by one showed that they were not merely false but were the direct cause of his own blindness and stupidity.' And [C.L.R.] James sees the heroic character of the blacks and especially of their leader, and thus the radicalism of Melville.... One might see in Babo's homicidal desire for freedom, and his uncompromising hatred of Cereno and the whites, a kind of new black man.... It is clear that [Amiri] Baraka and the Black Power movement would have understood Babo in his murderous hatred of Don Benito, indeed, identified with him; and exoriated Amasa Delano as the embodiment of fantastic white liberal values.... The echoes of Melville himself are there in the work of John Edgar Wideman, and Barbara Chase-Riboud, and of course in Charles Johnson.... When the Germans followed a totalitarian leader to their doom, Melville had foreseen it all....

[Ralph] Ellison looked at Melville and Melville's contemporaries and saw a group of writers with whom he obviously believed he had something in common. Between 1776 and 1876, he writes, 'there was a conception of democracy current in this country that allowed the writer to identify with the Negro.' Among those identifying were 'Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Mark Twain'.... In breaking with naturalism, Ellison appears to have found his major support not so much in writers more contemporary with him than Wright or Dreiser, but by moving backward toward Melville.... Melville facilitate[d] Ellison's decisive modification of naturalism by impressionism and surrealism, and thus his

self-liberation from both the 'domestic' and bourgeois discourse of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the almost dogmatic naturalism of Wright and Dreiser.... What expedites Ellison's fusion is his major borrowing from Melville—that is, the character of his narrator, who resembles no one else in previous fiction so much as he resembles Ishmael of *Moby-Dick*.... In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, he reprises a moment in the second chapter of *Moby-Dick*.... Embracing both white and black writers, [Toni] Morrison's tribute to Melville is unequivocal: 'To this day no novelist has so wrestled with its subject'."

Arnold Rampersad
"Melville and Race"

Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays
ed. Myra Jehlen
(Prentice-Hall 1994) 163-69, 171-73

"The most frequently mentioned color in *Benito Cereno* is black, but the contrast with white is implicit when not stated.... Each instance of the word *black* or of the idea of blackness in the story now becomes an integrating agent, a variation on a connective theme.... Negroes, throughout much of the story, are represented as natural, simple, and good. Whites, particularly Don Benito—who is ill, moody, and out of time with nature—apparently are not to be trusted....

After the climatic [*sic*] discovery of the drama that has been acted out on board the *San Dominick*, all that the reader has accepted as truth about nature and the innocence of natural man must be ironically reversed. Atufal is not really chained. Babo's loving service to Don Benito is a colossal hypocrisy. The Negresses are parties to the plot and are as murderous as the males.... Babo's is the mind that plots mutiny and murder; Babo's is the hand that aims a dirk at the heart of the good, the Christlike man.... The story falls for nearly all critics into a coherent, orderly pattern of meaning. Don Benito is pure good; Babo is pure evil; and Delano is the genial, insensitive observer. Melville sees the essential nature of the world clearly, and sees it as a perfect dichotomy.... Delano is tragically blind, a successful (that is ignorantly Adamic) American gentleman who can never, in any final sense, be saved. His opposite, Don Benito, a son of the old European culture, though sapped of will, is spiritually enlightened by his commerce with evil and the long dark past.... A little reflection and our minds stubbornly refuse to canonize Don Benito; we cannot believe that Delano is altogether blind; and we have some sympathy, too, for Babo....

Is it significant that *benito* means 'a Benedictine' and the Benedictines are Black Monks! Black Friars, as the Negroes are described early in the tale, and a Black Monk together aboard the ruined *San Dominick* seeing nothing but evil in each other! Delano finds wholesome and reassuring the glimpses he has of his jolly whaleboat, his link with the *Bachelor's Delight*, a well-known world where optimism and despair are mixed in normal proportions and kindly authority preserves a friendly order. Captain Delano, then, is not simply the obtuse observer, a detective story character who watches the plot unfold. He is in a serious sense the perceiving center, and in his innocent perceptiveness he reveals kinship to Jack Chase and Billy Budd. With Delano as our guide we see that the world is not nearly dichotomized, does not fall into a simply Manichean dualism. As in 'The Encantadas,' 'Often ill comes from good, as good from ill'.... Gray—mixed black and white—is now the thematic color of *Benito Cereno*. We see now why it is that at the opening of the story Amasa Delano rises shortly after a gray dawn to examine the strange sail coming into the dun bay; why the sea is sleeked like waved lead, the sky forming a gray surtout; why the *San Dominick* sails through shreds of fog over leaden swells' why gray fowl flit through gray vapours....

Benito Cereno is not to be thought of as an anti-slavery piece, and by our final interpretation Melville shows no signs of wishing to emulate Mrs. Stowe in reverse, that is by creating a Christlike white man to match against her black, martyred Uncle Tom. Don Benito is not a deeply perceptive martyr: the hypochondriac dies of his own inadequacy, of his inability to face or transcend the horror of life.... *Benito Cereno*, we see, is by the man who at a time when calmness was needed pleaded for understanding treatment of the South in his supplement to *Battle-Pieces* (1866) but classed himself among those 'who always abhorred slavery as an atheistical iniquity'....

In the source, Don Benito, himself, is caught in the act of stabbing a shackled slave; he proves to be dishonest in money matters and practices gross ingratitude towards Delano. In the source Delano takes a crudely pessimistic, juvenile view of life's moral mysteries; he cannot find it in his soul that he has ever

deserved them miseries of the ingratitude he has experienced.... Read for the second time, *Benito Cereno* is, like a Greek tragedy, an exercise in dramatic irony. On first reading the irony is retrospective: the revelation of the entire ironic situation breaks upon the reader after the action of the story is completed. Consequently, the fundamental, weighty ironies of the story have little to do with maintaining interest and integrating the story structurally for first readers. But these ironies do lend unifying strength to the structure when viewed retrospectively.”

Guy Cardwell

“Melville’s Gray Story: Symbols and Meaning in *Benito Cereno*”
Bucknell Review 8 (May 1959)

Benito Cereno (1855) is one of the best American novellas. It is the most profound treatment of slavery and race relations in American literature before Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and the works of Faulkner and Morrison. As a work of sustained dramatic irony, it is surpassed only by *Huck*, though *Benito* is clearly superior in one respect: it is taut with increasing suspense whereas *Huck* is loose. Note for example that Cereno is far from serene whereas Delano is blindly so. Faulkner saw the South as cursed by slavery. Melville sees blacks as the ‘shadow’--later a Jungian concept--in the psyche of white America, a theme taken up by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952).

Captain Amasa Delano is a liberal from Massachusetts, a goodhearted innocent--an American Adam--unconscious of his racism and dangerously blind to evil. He stands with Benjamin Franklin and Natty Bumppo as one of the most successful literary embodiments of America before the Civil War. The poet Robert Lowell adapted the story for the stage along with two tales from Hawthorne in a trilogy called *Old Glory* (1963). Melville affirms the equality of blacks by making the slaves as vicious in revenge as the whites have been to them and by making their leader Babo clever enough to make a fool of Delano throughout most of the story.

Michael Hollister (2015)