Melville's Use of a Real Slave Mutiny in "Benito Cereno"

Margaret Y. Jackson
North Carolina A&T College, Greensboro, North Carolina

The task of gaining some insight into the secrets of Herman Melville's great skill in plot manipulation, by observing how he allowed his imagination to operate upon the true facts with which he worked, is an extremely difficult one. Although in connection with *Typee* and the novels immediately following, Melville scholars made efforts to determine just what incidents constituted fact and what incidents were of the author's own fabrication, there was still much disagreement. But it is the consensus that Melville did not hesitate to take liberties with his experiences on the South Seas and aboard divers ships – liberties which resulted in tales possessing curious blend of realistic and romantic elements, a characteristic of all of his writings. Consequently, critics have been compelled to concur that with the American author, as with Shakespeare, it was not so much the incidents themselves that were significant and made for the astounding success of his works or that placed him in ascendancy among writers of fiction; but, rather, it was his unique synthesis of these facts, coming from direct and indirect experiences and creating a well of consciousness in which the author's imagination was the shaping force, that led to his widespread popularity in the twentieth century, if not during his own lifetime. Coleridge's creative imagination, so interestingly analyzed in John Livingston Lowes' scholarly work, *The Road* to *Xanadu,* obviously operated in a similar fashion in the realm of romantic, supernatural poetry.

In the examination of "Benito Cereno,"[1] the critic is afforded the opportunity, essential to the scientist, of holding constant one element while observing and studying variables. A single source of the major components of "Benito," the eighteenth chapter of a book written by one Captain Amasa Delano ("Particulars of the Capture of the Spanish Ship *Tryal,* at the Island of St. Maria, with the Documents Relating to That Affair"[2]), may be examined alongside Melville's story with a view to disclosing how his imagination worked in the creation of a romantic tale that made immortal Captain Delano's voyage.

[1] According to Harold H. Scudder, this story first appeared in serial form in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (October, November, December, 1855). The complete story was published in 1856. See Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales* 1856.

[2] See Captain Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere,* etc. (Boston, 1817).

Since the republication of this chapter of Captain Delano's practically unknown book by Mr. Scudder in 1928,[3] a few scanty attempts have been made to compare and to contrast the original with Melville's romanticized version in order to reveal what facts have been faithfully represented and what additions have been made. But surprisingly little has been done to determine the significance of the changes made in Melville's version, exactly what these changes – that made all the difference in the world between the success of the latter and the obvious failure of the former – reveal about Melville's artistic style, and what their possible results are. These are problems which demand scrutiny by Melville admirers. Although matters of time are of no particular concern to this study, one can hardly help wondering whether it was the obscurity of Captain Delano's book or the decline in popularity of Melville's writings in 1855 and immediately after, that allowed seventy-three years to pass before the original story was identified or, at least, before enough interest was manifested in it or in Melville's peculiar treatment of it to inspire formal critical treatment, sound or otherwise.

Certainly, Delano's own story must have been totally lacking in interest and in literary qualities in the early nineteenth century, so indifferent was posterity to its good or bad qualities. Only a cursory glance at this original version would be sufficient to convince one that the account of 1817 has little or no literary value to the reader of short stories of the present age. In the opinion of one critic these *Voyages* are "a work so obscure that, although Melville called Captain Delano by name in his story, it was not identified until over seventy years later and Melville was meanwhile credited with the entire invention of 'Benito Cereno's' plot."[4] In all fairness to Captain Delano, it might be pointed out here that the state of belles lettres in America in 1817 was at a low ebb. While the literature of travel and adventure had gained overwhelming approbation in England in the preceding century, as demonstrated by such masterpieces as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe,* the hey-day of travel and adventure literature was not to arrive in America until approximately twenty years later. In 1817 Washington Irving was the greatest narrative writer on American soil. James Fennimore Cooper was not to establish his reputation as a story teller until four years later, when he published *The Spy* (1821).

It is common knowledge that Melville's popularity as a story writer waned after the first two or three books, that the author himself was to a great extent affected by his reception, and I that only after his centenary was there a reawakening to his full worth as a literary man. Along with several other Melville critics, Mumford

[3] See Harold H. Scudder's, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno' and Captain Delano's Voyages," *PMLA*, XLIII (June, 1928), pp. 502-532.

[4] Geoffrey Stone, *Melville* (New York, 1949), p. 217.

is convinced that in certain passages "Benito" contains much that is more than incidentally autobiographical. Said he, "One does not need to heighten the parallels between Benito Cereno's fate and Melville's own life to catch the semblance of his own dilemma and his own bowed and wounded spirit."[5]

In a rather brief discussion of the two works immediately following his edition of Captain Delano's chapter, Mr. Scudder gives a scanty list of the changes made in Melville's version. A statement of these changes, along with some not included in Scudder's list is essential to the solution of the problems stated. Overlooking the discrepancies in dates (possibly caused by misreading on the part of Melville, as Scudder indicates), the change in the names of the ships, and the shifting of the names of the slaves, attributable to the author's superb poetic style and to his addiction to the use of symbolism, let us view briefly the major incidents representing a deviation from the original story. All other incidents not mentioned here may be assumed to be narrated just as they are in Captain Delano's story or to vary only slightly from it.

Most significant of all, Melville distorted the original version of the episode by discarding the entire section of the narrative dealing with the treachery of Don Benito, whom Delano pictures as the real villain of the narrative – far more cruel to Delano than the Negro slaves had been to the Spaniard and his crew[6] – but whom Melville depicts as a righteous and saintly man. The contrary impression is conveyed by a majority of the Melville critics, who make the misleading statement that Melville's account was taken almost verbatim from official records. The distortion results more from an omission of the second half of the original story than from a twisting of facts. Mumford's interpretation of the morals of the two different versions of the adventures will give some idea of the significance of the transformation wrought by Melville:

> The moral of the original tale is that ingratitude, stirred by cupidity, may follow the most generous act, and that American captains had better beware of befriending too wholeheartedly a foreign vessel. In "Benito Cereno" the point is that noble conduct and good will, like that Don Benito felt when his whole inner impulse was to save Delano and his crew, may seem sheer guile; and, further, that there is an inscrutable evil that makes the passage of fine souls through the world an endless Calvary. Even the best men err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted.[7]

[5] Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York 1929), p. 246.

[6] Scudder, p. 511.

[7] Mumford, *loco cit.*

Captain Delano's emphasis was on this total lack of appreciation on the part of the Spanish captain, who sought to blacken the character of the benevolent American in order to preserve the entire shipment on board the *Tryal (San Dominick)* for himself. Delano's crying out against the misery and ingratitude suffered from the very persons befriended by him emphasized the heartlessness of Don Benito, who viciously attempted to avenge himself on the slaves by using a dirk concealed in his shirt,[8] an incident necessarily omitted from Melville's portrayal of the perfectly honest and thoroughly good sea captain who had been overpowered by ruthless slaves. The execrable plight on board the *Perseverance* – the discovery among the crew of Botany Bay convicts, who caused untold misery to the captain by attempting *to* escape or to incite mutiny[9] – would certainly have been incongruent with the suggestive title, *Bachelor's Deliqht,* given Melville's ship, where there prevailed perfect consonance between captain and crew. Actually, three of Delano's own crew, outlawed convicts whose lives he had saved, showed their ingratitude by accepting bribes from Don Benito to testify against the American captain.[10]

Included in both narratives was Delano's promise to his crew of a share of the spoils of the Spanish ship for their success in capturing it. The practical and economical minded crew, who had netted less than twenty dollars per capita after being at sea for a year and a half, were determined to capture the *Tryal* when they were informed of the possibility of personal compensation for the deed. Since the ship had a cargo valued at $100,000, it is no wonder that the two small boats met with success. Perhaps it was by a stroke of genius that Melville, unlike Delano, ennobled the attacking sailors by having the captain spur them on with offers of material gain for subduing the mutinists only after they had made all preparations for the pursuit. Omitted altogether from the Melville story is the preserve all difficulty caused of the by money the mercenary for himself Don Benito Delano in and his efforts his crew, to after much delay and trouble, succeeded in getting $8,000, reluctantly given up by the Spaniard upon the receipt of threats of imprisonment from the magistrate at Conception and encouragement from the wealthy merchants of the port.[11] Finally, expecting some reward essentially to his advantage from the King of Spain for his services to that country, the disappointed Captain Delano was mailed a gold medal, on which was stamped a likeness of the King, and, along with it, a gracious letter, written by the King's servant and reminding him of the very

[8] Scudder, *loco. cit.*

[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 504-505.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 511.

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 512.

high honor that should be his for such recognition from that sovereign.[12] Thwarted thus on every hand, is it any wonder that the mundane sea captain should cry out against the ingratitude of mankind for services rendered? The omission of all these highly significant incidents has very important implications.

On the other hand, Melville added several scenes, among which was that in which Babo shaved Don Benito.[13] Of it Chase says, "The masterly scene in which Babo nicks Don Benito's throat while shaving him and in some unexplained way Don Benito retaliates by gently slashing Babo's cheek is a somnolent, charmed representation of a deathly duel.[14] " He interpolated the luncheon scene in which Francesco, the apparently ingratiating mulatto, was revealed as one of the persecutors.[15] Invented by Melville, also, was the symbolic dark satyr, reminiscent or images in the writings of Hawthorne: "But the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups or mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked."[16] Finally, the skeleton dangling from the prow of the *San Dominick* calls to mind a convention common in the Gothic romances of the late eighteenth century: "But by this time the cable of the *San Dominick* had been cut; and the fag-end, in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak, suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figurehead, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, 'follow your leader.'"[17]

With the relatively small number of material changes in the part of the story used by Melville, it seems as if there would be little difference between the two versions; but just the contrary is true. A highly realistic tale of the ingratitude of one captain to another, with a unique instance of a mutiny of slaves, interesting because of its incredibility, was transformed into a Gothic tale of terror, with an entirely different theme. How was this dull account made into a skillfully constructed tale, and what are the implications to be drawn therefrom?

In the first place, what was at first a mere suggestion of a mystery was made into an all-pervading, omnipresent element both in the descriptions and in the incidents in "Benito Cereno." In the original version, very little description was

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 526-529.

[13] Melville, *Piazza Tales* (New York, 1948), pp. 97-105.

[14] Richard Chase, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1949). p. 162.

[15] Melville, pp. 105-109.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

given of the *Perseverance* itself or of the leading persons participating in the gruesome action on board. But this is not true of Melville's story. The somber, corroded appearance of the *San Dominick,* with its symbolical dark satyr; the sphinx-like oakum pickers, with their monotonous chant; the Ashantee hatchet polishers, cymbaling their weapons at regular intervals; and – the supreme touch of terror – the skeleton of Don Aranda, only a few days murdered but made already into a skeleton by a process too horrible to reveal, all of these vivid descriptive elements combined to create a mood approaching in effect the atmosphere like that in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" or in "The Masque of the Red Death." And contributing no small share to this totality of effect, which, according to Poe, is the essence of the short story, were the strong appeals to the auditory and visual senses, about which Chase commented as follows:

> The mood of the story is fully achieved and maintained to perfection. Melville's characteristic contrasts of light and dark are resolved into a gray monotone occasionally illumined by flashes of fire. As in *Pierre,* the main action begins and ends with the rising and setting of the sun. But we scarcely see the sun in *Benito Cereno;* rather we see its light indirectly through the continuous grayness of an overcast day.

The whole action of the story takes place almost silently. Collusions of objects do not produce the normal volume of noise. The hatchets which certain old Negroes are polishing and which they clash together in an occasional ritualistic rhythm sound dull and leaden; the forecastle bell rings with a dreary grave-yard toll, betokening a flaw.[18]

In addition to these descriptive details added by Melville, the characterizations in "Benito" contribute a great deal to its success. Captain Delano's story is all narration, .having no really alive characters, not even the American captain himself. But Melville changed a rather dull, uninteresting, bitter American captain into an extremely optimistic, likeable person, though lacking in the mental acuteness necessary to detect the mutiny. But it is interesting to note that in Melville's story, both the captain's dullness of perception and his optimism are to be interpreted by the reader as attributes rather than as faults as they are in Thackeray's leading characters in *Vanity Fair.* As Chase says, "Captain Delano is no Promethean hero. Unsuspicious, 'undistrustful,' he is a benevolent and courageous man. He is able to save Benito Cereno from the Negroes precisely *because* of his spiritual superficiality – his somewhat mindless faith that everything will be all right, his optimistic belief in vitality and goodness. If Delano had lacked this kind of 'confidence,' he would have failed."[19]

[18] Chase, p. 151.

[19] *Ibid.,* p. 157.

Melville's depiction of the cunningly attentive Babo, who appears at one time to be only a devoted companion to his master and at another, a headsman at the block is indeed a contrast to the mere mention of the slave leader in Delano's version. The manacled Atufal, a princely sentinel whose constant appearance in chains before Captain Benito, reveals the latter's apparently unsuccessful efforts to bend his spirit, adds greatly to the mystery surrounding the ship, and gives sufficient justification in itself for Delano's inability to discern the true state of affairs. Francesco, the mulatto presiding over the luncheon, not only offers an excellent opportunity for Melville's comment (through dialogue) on the effects of the mixture of white and black blood, but also appears as an interesting person himself and one of Melville's principal sources of irony in this masterpiece of irony. All of these minor characters add considerably to the unity of mood and tone essential to the good short story, but completely lacking in Captain Delano's narrative, in which none of these persons is presented in action.

But the supreme touch of genius is in the adaptation of Benito Cereno to the atmosphere and setting already created. Benito turned by Melville from a cruel, unappreciative man into a highly sensitive, benevolent, and pitiable invalid, is, for the author, the key to the complete mystery surrounding the ship. *Is he good or is he evil?* This is the central question. The correct answer to it will explain for Delano the almost imperceptible irregularities observed everywhere aboard the ship: the seemingly meaningful glances of the Spanish sailors, the unruliness of the slaves, the attentions of Babo. At times Delano's intuition tells him that Benito is a victim of the slaves; but most often he considers him a cruel, pampered captain who would seek vengeance even on a devoted servant for an accidental cut received while being shaved. Quite evident is the alternation between hope and despair on the part of Captain Delano, hope when he thinks that Don Benito is good and that all is well, and despair when he is convinced that the Spaniard is a force of evil, collaborating with the slaves. This same skepticism characterized not a few of the writings of the latter half of the nineteenth century, including Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and Arnold's "Dover Beach," and was, in its own unique way, an essential element in "Benito Cereno." But Benito, like Moby Dick and Bartleby, is inscrutable, and to the very end the American captain errs in his efforts to penetrate the mystery. What Melville says symbolically of one of the Spanish sailors may be interpreted as the central theme of this tale. When Captain Delano hesitatingly approaches one of the sailors dipping his arms in a bucket of tar and wearing an indefinable expression on his face, the author ironically comments, "Since, as intenseheat and cold, though unlike produce like sensations, so innocence and guilt, when, through casual association with mental pain, stamping any visible impress, use one seal – a

hacked one."[20] It is only after Benito makes his leap to physical safety (morally, he is already destroyed) that Delano is convinced of his goodness. Thus, Melville used the Spaniard to represent the force of good; the slaves to represent a kind of dark fatality hovering over him and crushing him in the end. This symbolism is obvious in the final dialogue between Delano and Don Benito, possibly the most quoted passage in the tale. In handling the character of Don Benito, Melville proves his central point: good and evil, when viewed through the facial facade, are completely indistinguishable.

In the original version of the story the whole incident 01 the mutiny is revealed on the very first page. Nothing is withheld from the reader for the purpose of heightening the element of suspense. There are at least four versions of this one incident given by as many persons. Hence approximately seventeen pages of the original twenty-seven consist of a dull collection of depositions, repeating in legal phrasing the story told by Delano, with few additions. It is clearly obvious that Melville has successfully transformed a dull unliterary narrative into a structurally perfect tale of terror. He did this by *presenting* the action rather than by *narrating* it, by avoiding a monotonous repetition of incidents, by withholding the surprise element (the mutiny) until the final scene, and by creating and maintaining a unity of impression throughout.

Perhaps the greatest advantage that Melville's story has over the original is that implicit in it, as in all of his tales, are several levels of meaning. A suspense-filled story of an unusual meeting at sea, an allegorical interpretation of the author's ill-treatment at the hands of his contemporaries, a continuation of his preoccupation with forces of good and evil, "Benito Cereno" has all of the literary appeal of the classics. And there is room for still other interpretations equal in importance to the ones mentioned, inasmuch as Melville, like Hawthorne, employed the device of suggestion, with the intention of the reader allowing his imagination to play on the facts presented; hence, the controversial nature of many of the major problems in his writings. Like Hawthorne, also, Melville could in a loose sense be considered a kind of transcendentalist, although he was not directly associated with the New England group, of whom Emerson was the leader in America. Melville himself identified *The Scarlet Letter* as the chief source of inspiration for *Moby Dick*, which he published just one year after Hawthorne's masterpiece appeared. All who have read any of Melville's writings must agree with Stone that this short story does" postulate metaphysical entities as informing its characters, placing in it a deeper layer of mystery."[21]

[20] Melville, p. 85.

[21] Stone, p. 220.

Yet, all of these virtues do not prevent one from questioning Melville's treatment of his sources. Among the three treacherous factions in the original tale, why did he have to make the slaves, actually the only ones in any way excusable for their actions, into the single force of evil? Could he not have presented the same theme retaining Benito as the worst villain of the lot? Possibly Melville, like Hawthorne again, saw the advantage of having physical characteristics serve as symbols of moral imperfection. But even with his preoccupation with a single theme, could one excuse him for distorting facts at this crucial moment in history when slaveholders were eager to grasp at any derogatory view of the Negro? Many of his contemporaries, evidently, thought not. But Thomas Carlyle, on the other side of the Atlantic, must have been amused at this story by an American "Yankee"; and, having already published his "Nigger Question" (1849), he probably felt no twinge of conscience in presenting to the public his "Iliad in a Nutshell" (1863).

As has been indicated, the opportunities for interpreting the meaning below the surface of a symbolical tale like "Benito Cereno" are boundless. And often two different interpretations may be directly contradictory to each other. Whatever the interpretation, it is impossible to completely dissociate Melville's story of Captain Delano's experiences from the period in which it was written. In addition, then, to possessing many of the characteristics of two other literary genres – the travel story of the eighteenth century and the Gothic romance of the pre-romantic period – "Benito Cereno" falls, somewhat loosely, into that class of literary matter labeled "slave narratives." In 1855 the slave struggle in America was at its height. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which enabled Southern slaveholders to retake fugitives on northern soil, had the effect of a "tempest in a teapot." In 1855 many Negro slaves had escaped, nevertheless and had published narratives depicting the true horrors of slave territories (some of these men had been apprehended and returned to the South from under the very noses of the Vigilance Committees of the anti-slavery forces). In 1855 Melville's New England contemporaries had openly stated their determination to defy the laws that would have the assist in enslaving a fellow countryman. Such was the social climate at the time of the writing of "Benito Cereno." Furthermore Melville must have been familiar with at least two other true stories of slave insurrections on the open seas. In 1839 an African slave by the name of Cinque and his comrades, referred to in records as the "Amistad Captives," aroused all of America when, spurred on by a passion for liberty, they mutinied on board the slave vessel *Amistad.*[22] After killing the Captain and part of the crew, leaving only two male passengers to steer the craft to their African home, Cinque himself took command. Knowing nothing about navigation, he was

[22] See. John W. Barber, *History of the Amistad Captives* (New Haven, 1840). Also William A. Owens, *Slave Mutiny* (New York. 1958).

unaware that the ship was intentionally steered off course. The slaves, badly in need of provisions and water, were taken prisoners near New York and held in this country for approximately two years. After much controversy, these slaves from the Mendi country were freed and given instruction in the cultivation of the soil, the English language, and the Bible. The group of Negroes impressed favorably all who heard and saw them at frequent anti-slavery meetings. This unusual case ended with the little group returning to their native country and taking with them missionaries, under the leadership of the Reverend William Raymond, who later wrote a glowing tribute to the captives, as well as to the country to which the Americans were welcomed. Significant points of similarity to be found in this incident and in "Benito Cereno" lead one to suppose that Melville must have been familiar with the Amistad incident. Many of the elements of horror – the emaciated condition of the slaves, the barnacled sides of the ship, the corpse found on board the ship, and the severe emotional tension of the captain, indicate a striking similarity.

Still another slave mutiny, which might possibly have aided in making the author interested in this type of plot as a basis for a short story, occurred before Melville's narrative appeared. One slave narrator gave the following account in his treatment of the incident:

> On the night of the 9th of November, 1841, Madison Washington and two others, named respectively Pompey Garrison, and Ben Blacksmith arose upon the captain and crew, leading all the other slaves after them, and gave the captain the alternative of sailing the vessel into a British port, one of the Bahamas, or of going overboard. The captain, wisely and safely for himself, chose the former; and these three brave blacks, naturally distrusting the forced promise of the Yankee captain, stood sentry over him until he did steer the "Creole" into the port of Nassau, island of New Providence, touching which they became free men.[23]

Both incidents related above, while bearing a similarity to Melville's story, varied from it by having happy endings for the Negroes involved. Hence, Melville, writing during a period of internal strife, could not have been completely oblivious of the damaging consequences of his distortion of the truth at a time when the controversy over slavery was at its peak.

While he apparently was not identified with the abolitionists, it seems to be common knowledge that the author of "Benito Cereno" sympathized with the anti-slavery forces. If this is true, one might with justification ask, "But why did Melville deliberately ignore the second half of the narrative?" It is altogether possible that he saw the necessity of concentrating on only one incident in the Delano story,

[23] Samuel R. Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* (London, 1855), pp. 167-168.

the first part; Benito's treachery in the original version would, no doubt, have unnecessarily cluttered up the plot structure and destroyed the single effect strived for. Then, too, it could be possible that Melville had in mind presenting to the anti-slavery agitators another point of view: there exists no accurate stereotyped portrait of the Negro as most Caucasians seem to think. For is not this tale a refutation of various generalizations accepted as applicable to the Negro, of whom, indeed, much of the space in "Benito Cereno" is consumed in discussing? The author summons through dialogues such of these views as the following: Negroes are simple, rather than complex people; they are music-loving, happy-go-lucky, incapable of deception, and naturally endowed with those qualities expected to be found in valets and personal servants; and Negro women differ from other women in that they have at once a tender heart and a tough constitution, as well as a special capacity to fight for their infants or to die for them.

While entertaining these ideas in the presence of Captain Benito, Delano himself began to doubt his old views. Ironically, while trying to make his generalizations fit into the situation, he discovered that the whole system of behavior constructed by him for the Negro was collapsing. He became convinced finally that the slaves, like their white masters, were capable of cruelty and cunning and that Negro women were simply of a species that is "more deadly than the male." In short, be revealed that "allness" theories, when made applicable to a race of people, are extremely dangerous and erroneous. Luckily, in the end Delano found this fact to be true, but almost at the expense of his own life; for even when his intuition warned him otherwise, he attempted to apply false generalizations.

In this tale, Melville did more than grapple with the problem of good and evil. He recognized the error of many of the original conceptions which he had entertained concerning a group of people. Although one can readily sympathize with the author's preoccupation with the great "white whale" of evil that he allowed to permeate all of his works, and with his acceptance of a convention of the period – that of finding suitable symbols everywhere – one cannot help quarrelling with his seeming indifference to the plight of the slaves in this particular period of his life (even if his own problem loomed heavy before him, obliterating all others). Hence one can feel sufficiently justified in censuring the author for allowing a possible interpretation that he pursued one goal to the detriment of all else that is noble and good in life; that is, in his treatment of the Benito Cereno story Melville's pro-slavery readers could read between the lines that the author was supporting the institution of slavery in America by distorting the true incidents as they occurred in real life. It is not surprising perhaps that Melville received his comeuppance – poor reception of the work in the middle of the nineteenth century – for his failure to realize the possibility of serious results from such a story, however skillfully executed.

Perhaps, though, others may find the distortion of the incident unpleasant but may consider even this distortion preferable to the frequent erroneous generalizations about racial groups that Melville so consistently seemed to promulgate in his writings. Nevertheless, despite his unpleasant handling of the story, one cannot fail to observe that the author's chief concern in "Benito Cereno" is not with the slavery question per se, but rather with the problem of good and evil; and that he had, in his search for one more symbol, seized upon the Negro to represent in his tale the formidable force against which good could offer no substantial resistance.

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