Benito Cereno

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HERMAN MELVILLE

Herman Melville developed an early interest in literature and writing but spent much of his youth working to support his family, who lived in poverty after the death of Melville's father. In the 1840s, Melville worked on merchant and whaling ships in the Pacific Ocean. Through these travels, Melville became sensitive to the plight of indigenous people oppressed by colonialism. His adventures during these journeys—including Melville's capture by a group of cannibalistic people and his participation in a mutiny—served as the foundation for his first novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). These unconventional works elicited both scandal and admiration, subsequently allowing Melville to devote himself to writing. In his following works, Melville developed a deep interest in moral issues, such as racial injustice and the human capacity for violence. In a covert manner, he explored such issues in his masterpiece *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* in 1851. Although *Moby Dick* is undoubtedly Melville's most famous work today, at the time of its publication it attracted little interest. Over the next few years, Melville became increasingly reclusive and published pessimistic short stories about human greed and hypocrisy, such as *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) and *Benito Cereno* (1855). In the 1860s, Melville turned toward poetry instead of fiction, but this did not bring him much literary recognition. Although Melville's fame soon vanished in his lifetime, leading him to die in near anonymity, he is now considered one of the greatest American writers in history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Benito Cereno*, Melville references historical events that give credibility to his depiction of revolting slaves. He makes implicit reference to the slave revolution in Haiti, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, which ultimately led to the freeing of slaves and the country's independence in 1804. Instead of setting the story in 1855 (the date of its publication), Melville sets it in 1799, in the middle of the Haitian revolution. He also renames Cereno's ship (called *Tryal* in the original historical narrative) *San Dominick*, a reference to "Saint-Domingue, "the French colonial name for Haiti. These subtle references give urgency to the narrative of *Benito Cereno*, gloomily suggesting that, just as happened in Haiti, it is possible that the U.S. will one day experience the violence of a large-scale slave revolt. At the time of Melville's writing, the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) sought to repeal the Missouri Compromise, which divided the country into the American North, where slavery was illegal, and the slave-owning in the South. The Kansas-Nebraska Act launched a nation-wide debate about whether or not slavery should be allowed in Kansas. Melville's understanding that slave societies breed violence was confirmed by the period known as "Bleeding Kansas" (1854-1861), in which pro- and anti-slavery activists opposed each other through violent conflict. It is during this period that famous anti-slavery activist John Brown took part in a massacre at Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas. Five years later, it is the American Civil War (1861-65) that will determine the fate of slavery in the U.S. in the way that Melville already anticipated—through hatred, terror, and violence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Benito Cereno is based on an 1817 memoir by Captain Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*. In this memoir, Captain Delano describes discovering a ship on which a slave revolt has taken place. Although Melville uses this anecdote as inspiration, he modifies many of the original story's details to fit the moral and social message he wishes to convey. In particular, Melville introduces many elements that enhance the ambiguity of the relationship between leader and follower, oppressor and oppressed. Melville invents details, such as the shaving scene between Babo and Cereno, the character of the chained Atufal, and the scene of the knot. All these fictional episodes highlight the symbolic meaning of *Benito Cereno*, in which Melville denounces the ambiguous nature of human perception and the complexity of human violence—issues that are evident in his other works, such as his famous novel *Moby-Dick*. Published a few years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beacher Stowe (1852)—a novel that was later criticized for promoting harmful stereotypes about black people—*Benito Cereno* criticizes the kind of attitude that undergirds Stowe's works and many Northern abolitionists' views. By depicting a central character, Captain Delano, who criticizes slavery while maintaining a racist attitude, Melville shows that even seemingly well-intentioned Northerners are not morally perfect but, rather, participate in the moral oppression and degrading of black people. A few years before *Benito Cereno*, abolitionist Frederick Douglass published a short story, *The Heroic Slave* (1852), about the largest slave revolt in U.S. history, in which slaves were freed by successfully sailing a ship to the Bahamas. Set in entirely different historical circumstances, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne (one of Melville's acquaintances) explores similar themes as *Benito Cereno*: the potentially oppressive nature of human law, the meaning of sin, and the possibility of moral redemption.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Benito Cereno
- **When Written:** 1854-55
- **Where Written:** New York City, NY
- **When Published:** First serialized in 1855, published as a book in 1856.
- **Literary Period:** Romantic Period
- **Genre:** Novella, parable
- **Setting:** The Pacific Ocean between Chile and Peru in 1799
- **Climax:** After Babo tries to kill Cereno, Delano finally understands that a slave revolt has taken place on the *San Dominick*.
- **Antagonist:** Plot-wise, Delano and Cereno's most dangerous enemy is Babo, the leader of the slave rebellion. More generally, by highlighting the evil consequences that slavery can lead to, Herman Melville identifies slavery, violence, and structural injustice as the greatest threats to society.
- **Point of View:** Third-person narrator, mostly following the point of view of Captain Amasa Delano

EXTRA CREDIT

The Difficulty of Interpretation. Although *Benito Cereno* contains clear ironic statements about protagonist Captain Delano's racist views, the ambiguity at the heart of the short story led to a variety of critical interpretations. Critics have debated whether the revolting slaves should be seen as an embodiment of evil or as admirable revolutionaries—and, more generally, whether the story is pro- or anti-racist. Such debates only reinforce Melville's understanding that human perception is limited and influenced by each reader or observer's individual biases.

A Revolutionary Mind. Herman Melville was very proud of the fact that both of his grandfathers played an important part in the American Revolutionary War, which led to the country's independence. In line with Melville's fascination with this revolution, the idea that violent rebellion can put an end to servitude and oppression is one of the foundational themes in *Benito Cereno*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Based on a true story, Herman Melville's 1855 novella *Benito Cereno* follows American Captain Amasa Delano's discovery of a ship he first believes to be in distress before realizing, over the course of the same day, that a slave revolt has taken place on it.

Amasa Delano is a naïve, optimistic ship captain from Massachusetts. When he anchors his trading ship, the *Bachelor's Delight*, in the harbor of the island of Santa Maria, near Chile, he soon sees a mysterious ship appear. Noticing that the ship is **flag**-less, in disrepair, and seems in peril, he decides to go offer his help, bringing provisions for what he imagines to be a troubled crew.

Once Delano sets foot on the ship, the *San Dominick*, he discovers that it is a Spanish slave ship commanded by a strange captain, Don Benito Cereno. Everyone on board—slaves and sailors alike—is distraught and in miserable physical condition. Delano learns that the ship has experienced an epidemic of scurvy then a terrible storm, followed by a long period of calm, which decimated both the sailors and the slaves, ultimately leaving the black slaves much more numerous than the white crew members.

Delano also discovers that Benito Cereno is uncommonly affected by these harrowing experiences. The Spanish captain behaves in unstable ways, alternating rude words, coughing fits, and moments of weakness in which he cannot stand. He is always accompanied by his faithful slave Babo, who supports Cereno at all times. Over time, Delano becomes increasingly annoyed by the intimacy that exists between Cereno and Babo. He finds that, when they speak together, they have a conspiratorial air. Cereno asks Delano strange questions about his ship and sometimes seems to forget the details that he mentioned about the *San Dominick*'s journey.

In addition to the distraught captain, Delano notices other bizarre occurrences on the ship, where insubordination and disorder seem to reign. Some groups of slaves, the oakum-pickers and hatchet-polishers, play a weak policing role on board, but Delano sees them as eerie, mysterious creatures. On a few occasions, the slaves behave violently toward the Spanish sailors, hitting them in a way that Delano believes should merit immediate punishment. However, weak and apathetic Cereno does nothing about it.

Delano also notices that some Spanish sailors stare at him intently, perhaps trying to communicate a secret to him. However, any time the black slaves intervene in these exchanges, the sailors become shy and quiet. On one occasion, Delano sees a sailor make an intricate **knot** made of a variety of smaller knots. When Delano interrogates the man about the knot's purpose, the sailor suddenly throws it to him, telling him in broken English to cut the knot. Delano does not understand what is happening. A slave then arrives, taking the knot from Delano and throwing it in the ocean.

Confused by these events, Delano attempts to reflect on their root causes. He considers various hypotheses. He wonders if Cereno is insane or an impostor plotting to kill him—perhaps even someone who has allied with the black slaves. However, every time Delano examines such theories, he concludes that they are ridiculous, that he is offending his host by nurturing such suspicions, and that everything is probably fine. Intensely concerned with politeness and good manners, Delano resolves to maintain a noble, generous attitude despite the underlying

tensions he can sense on the ship.

A crucial factor persuading Delano that everything must be fine on the *San Dominick* is his conviction that the racial hierarchy is natural and unchangeable. Throughout *Benito Cereno*, Delano proves deeply racist. He believes that black people are naturally inferior to white people and are meant to serve them as slaves. After a tension-filled shaving scene, in which Babo cuts Cereno's cheek while shaving him and Babo later shows Delano a wound that Cereno has apparently inflicted on him in retribution, Delano is shocked. Although he concludes that Cereno must be a cruel slave-master, he never realizes that slavery is inherently violent because it dehumanizes slaves and makes them vulnerable to their masters' whims. Rather, Delano sees Cereno and Babo's relationship as an intense friendship, marked by alternating moments of love and fighting.

When Delano's boat finally arrives with provisions, he asks an ever-gloomy Benito Cereno to accompany him to the *Bachelor's Delight*, where he might recover physically and mentally from his hardships. Although Cereno refuses, he suddenly jumps into Delano's boat at the last minute. Still under the impression that Cereno is a suspicious character, Delano believes that Cereno is pretending that he has been kidnapped. It is only once Babo also jumps into the boat, holding a dagger aimed at Cereno, that Delano finally grasps the truth: it is not Cereno, but *Babo* who has murderous intentions. Looking up at the slaves on the *San Dominick*, who are now protesting in rage, Delano understands that a slave revolt has taken place on the ship and that, throughout his time on the ship, the black slaves, not the Spanish sailors, were secretly in control. Over the next few hours, Delano's crew succeeds in subduing the slaves and recapturing the *San Dominick*.

The narrator then provides excerpts from Benito Cereno's testimony at the trial that took place in Lima against the rebellious slaves. Cereno explains that Babo was the leader of the slave revolt, assisted by Atufal, an imposing black slave who pretended to be kept in chains. Instead of being the passive, docile slave who confirmed Delano's racist stereotypes, Babo is in fact a highly intelligent leader capable of extreme cruelty. Babo and Atufal ordered Spanish sailors to be thrown overboard alive and fed to the sharks. Babo also ordered Cereno's best friend, slave-owner Alexandro Aranda, to be killed and his skeleton placed as the ship's figure-head. Babo used this corpse as a reminder to the Spanish sailors that, if they rebelled, they would "follow their leader"—that is, die.

The narrator then goes back in time to a conversation Delano and Cereno had on their way to Lima after the recapture of the *San Dominick*. Noticing that Cereno is still sad and depressed, Delano tries to bolster his spirits by insisting that he is now safe. Cereno, however, is less concerned with personal safety than with moral issues. Traumatized by what he has experienced, Cereno realizes that slavery breeds rage and despair in the slaves, who then prove capable of committing atrocious acts of violence against their enslavers. This thought does not give Cereno rest. His focus on the past emphasizes that it is only by confronting past horrors and injustice that people can prove fully human and moral.

After the trial, Babo—who has refused to talk ever since being captured—and the other slaves are sentenced to capital punishment. Babo's head is displayed on a public square. Still affected by everything he experienced on the *San Dominick*, Cereno dies three months later, thus metaphorically "following his leader" to the grave. The identity of this leader—whether Babo or Aranda—is left open to interpretation.

CHARACTERS

Captain Amasa Delano – The protagonist of *Benito Cereno* is a ship captain from Duxbury, Massachusetts, operating a ship called the *Bachelor's Delight*. As the third-person narrator follows Delano's point of view throughout the story, giving access to the character's inner thoughts, it soon becomes apparent that Delano is not a reliable observer. As a ship captain, Delano exudes authority and pragmatism. Focused on respecting good manners, he also proves naturally friendly and generous, determined to behave politely toward others in all situations and to help those in need. However, he also exhibits many moral flaws. First of all, he proves deeply naïve about the existence of violence and cruelty in the world. He rejects the idea that human beings can behave in an evil manner—a belief that leads him to misevaluate risks, such as the possibility that the *San Dominick* could be a pirate ship. Delano is capable of recognizing the strangeness of certain events, but his thoughts always aim to reassure him, not to delve into the complexity of human nature. Secondly, Delano is deeply racist—more so than he seems to realize. Although he prides himself in being kind toward black people, his racist ideas lead him to believe that black people are inferior to white people and are therefore naturally meant to serve them as slaves. Unwilling (or unable) to reflect on injustice, Delano does not realize that slavery is inherently cruel in its dehumanization of black people. Although Delano's discovery of the slave revolt on the *San Dominick* could potentially change his views, since it demonstrates that black people are both intelligent and desperate to regain their freedom, it has no visible effect on Delano's mindset. Instead of learning from this experience, Delano chooses to ignore it, preferring to remain faithful to his simple-minded view of the world as a naturally just and pleasant place—one in which *he* is able to live an agreeable life. Delano's character thus highlights the extent to which, through intense self-centeredness, people can remain blind to the suffering of others and the injustice that exists in the world.

Don Benito Cereno – The Spanish captain of the *San Dominick* initially appears emotionally distraught, physically weak, and passive in his leadership role, to the point of making Captain

Delano think that Cereno might be insane. However, Cereno's behavior on the *San Dominick* is never genuine, because Cereno is secretly controlled by Babo, the leader of a slave rebellion. Cereno's erratic attitude is therefore a mix of genuine fear (of his captor Babo) and emotional trauma (due to the violence of the slave rebellion). Cereno's apparent passivity derives from his need to pretend to Delano that he is still in charge of the *San Dominick*, while actually letting Babo govern from the sidelines. Cereno's ambiguous, untrustworthy attitude thus reflects the complex, life-threatening situation he finds himself in—not an inherent lack of courtesy. It is only once the Delano's crew recaptures the *San Dominick* that Cereno is able to express his true nature. Although, as a slave trader, Cereno might be expected to have an indifferent or cruel attitude toward black slaves, his experience of the slave rebellion—in which his childhood friend Alexandro Aranda was brutally murdered—makes him much more sensitive than Delano to the injustice and potentially dangerous consequences of slavery. Having witnessed first-hand the violent hatred and anger that can motivate black slaves to rebel, Cereno feels a mix of awe and fear toward Babo, his captor. Unlike Delano, he now realizes that slavery might be immoral and that subjugating others by force could lead to nothing more than violence and death, as it did on the *San Dominick*. As a result, Cereno concludes that it is only by confronting past harm and present injustice (such as the enslavement of black people) that one can prove truly human and moral. His death three months after that of his "leader" Babo suggests that Cereno's fate is inextricably tied to the former slave. This supports Melville's argument that, in a slave society, master and slave depend on each other in a cruel, yet deep-seated, relationship of dependence and domination.

Babo – Babo is one of the African slaves traded on the *San Dominick*. As the secret ringleader of the slave revolt, he is an enigmatic, fascinating character, both deeply intelligent and unabashedly cruel. A striking aspect of Babo's character in *Benito Cereno* is that, despite his crucial role in the narrative, he is never given a voice. His words in Captain Delano's presence cannot be trusted because they are part of a performance in which Babo pretends to be an innocent, devoted servant to Benito Cereno and abides by racist stereotypes that he knows Delano will be receptive to. Babo's repetitive actions, such as physically supporting Cereno and staring him in the eyes, have the double function of convincing Delano that Babo is a deeply caring servant and, simultaneously, of menacingly reminding Cereno that he should follow Babo's orders. The shaving scene, in which Babo cuts Cereno's cheek, represents the climax of the life-threatening tension that exists between the two characters, since Babo could easily use his razor to cut Cereno's throat. It also reveals Babo's knowledge and use of symbolism, as he uses a Spanish **flag** as an apron to assert his power and express his contempt for the Spanish empire. In Cereno's testimony, the extent of Babo's tyranny finally comes to light. During the slave revolt, Babo, with the help of his assistant Atufal, orders Spanish soldiers to be thrown overboard alive, to be eaten by sharks. He also orders Cereno's best friend Alexandro Aranda to be killed, before using his skeleton as the ship's figure-head. This highlights Babo's cruel, strategic thinking, as Babo knows that he must instill terror in the sailors to keep them from rebelling. Babo is ultimately sentenced to capital punishment in Lima. His silent presence at the end of the novella, through his publicly displayed head, highlights Babo's enduring influence as a victim, a vengeful oppressor, and a judge—someone whose dehumanizing treatment as a slave and whose subsequent violent rebellion highlight the horrors of slavery.

Atufal – Babo's assistant in the slave rebellion is a tall, imposing man who was previously a tribal leader in Africa (Babo calls him a "king" and Cereno a "chief'). In Captain Delano's presence, Atufal walks around in chains, an elaborate performance to convince Delano that he is harmless. Delano is told that Atufal has committed an unacceptable deed and must periodically ask forgiveness to Cereno, which the slave refuses to do. This convinces Delano that Atufal has a dignified character and that Cereno must be a cruel slave-master. What Delano ignores is that Atufal is not a helpless victim, but a powerful actor strategically positioned to help Babo in case of trouble. Not much is known about Atufal's actual personality. Proving just as pragmatic and indifferent to violence as Babo, he takes part in daily meetings with Babo to organize the slaves' return to Africa and to debate whether they should murder all the Spaniards on board. Like Babo, Atufal never kills anyone himself, preferring to adopt a leadership role. He is killed in the recapture of the *San Dominick* by Delano's crew.

Alexandro Aranda – Benito Cereno's childhood friend Alexandro Aranda is the owner of most of the slaves on the *San Dominick* before the slaves' rebellion. Although not much is known about Aranda's character, he seems trusting and optimistic, since he decides not to keep the slaves in chains, assuming that they are docile. This attitude reflects Captain Delano's naïve, racist belief that black slaves are naturally passive and obedient. During the slave revolution, Babo orders a couple of Ashantee men to kill Aranda, in order to ensure the slaves' freedom and, through terror, to keep the remaining sailors from rebelling. Babo orders Aranda's body cleaned (through probable cannibalism) and his skeleton placed as the figure-head of the ship. Babo then uses this skeleton as a threat that, if the sailors try to revolt, they will "follow their leader" and die like Aranda.

Francesco – This biracial servant from Buenos Aires, originally the cabin steward on the *San Dominick*, takes part in the early stages of the slave revolt. Unaware of Francesco's role in this rebellion, Delano concludes, from a weak reply on Cereno's part, that Francesco must be a good person because his "white

blood" makes him superior to black people—an episode that only confirms that Delano consistently views the world through a racist lens. Although not much is known about Francesco's life, he proves enterprising and devoted to the revolt when he suggests to Babo that they poison Delano, an idea that Babo discards.

The Hatchet-Polishers (Ashantee Men) – Like the oakum-pickers, this group of men from Ashantee (a kingdom in Western Africa) is positioned on a deck slightly higher than the rest of the crowd. Captain Delano immediately finds them eerie and threatening. He calls them "conjurors" or "wizards" because of their imposing presence. Although he believes that these men are only polishing hatchets, Babo has actually placed them in a strategic position so that they can distribute arms to the black slaves in case violence erupts. As Benito Cereno's testimony reveals, members of this group prove cruel, playing an important part in killing Alexandro Aranda and cleaning his skeleton.

The Oakum-Pickers – Placed on an elevated position like the strategic hatchet-polishers, these men separate old ropes into loose strands (oakum). They play a secret policing role, keeping an attentive eye on everything that happens on the *San Dominick* to make sure that relative order is maintained, so as not to alarm Captain Delano. However, despite their role as sentinels, they attract Delano's attention when they hit a sailor with a knife after the man expresses hope that Delano might free the Spaniards. Through this violent deed, they provide a first clue that the black slaves, not the Spanish sailors, might actually be in charge.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM AND PREJUDICE

Herman Melville's 1855 novella *Benito Cereno*, based on a real-life event, follows Captain Amasa Delano's discovery of a ship on which a slave revolt has taken place. Through Delano's confused perspective, Melville shows that prejudice and racist assumptions about the world can blind people to reality. On the *San Dominick*, a Spanish slave ship, Delano meets the captain, Don Benito Cereno, a moody, cryptic character who is always accompanied by his faithful slave Babo. Although Delano notices mysterious events on the ship and does not fully believe Cereno's account of the ship's journey, it is only once Cereno tries to escape that Delano finally grasps the truth: the *San Dominick* has experienced a slave revolt and the black slaves—not Cereno—are actually in charge. Delano's shock at uncovering this state of affairs reveals that, until then, his automatic adherence to racial hierarchy has kept him from conceiving of a slave rebellion. Through Delano's experience, Melville aims to show that, more than *learning from* reality, people often *impose on* reality their pre-existing biases, thus remaining blind to dynamics that do not conform to their convictions.

From the beginning of the novella, readers gain access to Amasa Delano's thoughts. Although Delano is an efficient ship captain, it soon appears that he is not as perceptive as he believes himself to be. Instead of being a detached, rational observer, Delano is prone to error and prejudice.

Delano's point of view is limited because he lacks perceptive skills. The narrator calls Delano "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable [...] [to attribute] malign evil in man." While this initially portrays Delano in a seemingly positive light, showing him as a generous, trustful human being, the narrator proceeds to imply that, instead of being a positive trait, this quality is in fact a defect, making Delano more susceptible to being fooled: "Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies [...] more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine." The narrator thus signals to attentive readers that Delano might not be as reliable as he seems, since Delano is blind to "what humanity is capable"—evil and harm—and might therefore not be as smart as he thinks. The narrator criticizes Delano for his naivety but does not condemn him entirely. Rather, he encourages readers to make up their own mind about the character as the story evolves.

In addition to being naïve, Delano harbors racist beliefs. He considers white people "the shrewder race" and sees black people as unsophisticated beings with "a limited mind." When Delano sees how efficiently Babo behaves, he concludes that all black people are naturally compliant: "There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person." Delano's generalizations about race lead him to trust that black people are meant to be inferior to white ones and, therefore, that they are ideal slaves. His understanding of people's behaviors on the ship is therefore not neutral but determined by racism.

What Delano does not realize is that, instead of *stemming from* an objective observation of reality, his racist beliefs *condition* what he is able to perceive. When Delano finally discovers that the situation on Cereno's ship is the exact opposite of what he thought—and that black people, not white Spaniards, are in power—it becomes clear that Delano's assumptions about race and authority have completely blinded him to reality. On the ship, Delano believed that Babo and his companions' behavior was genuine because it conformed to traditional stereotypes about black slaves—stereotypes that Delano was receptive to, since they reflected his own beliefs about black people's

passivity and meekness. It is only once Delano discovers that Babo has led a slave insurrection and is only *pretending* to be a docile slave that "the scales dropped from his eyes." Melville thus demonstrates that Delano's racist beliefs never derived from an astute observation of reality, but from Delano's eagerness to believe in stereotypes. On Cereno's ship, ignoring his suspicions and believing in Babo's pretense, Delano only saw what he *wanted* to see: a world in which white people are naturally justified in ruling over black people.

Through Delano's experience, Melville highlights the dangerous effect of racial bias. Melville discredits Delano's racist views by showing that they do not mirror reality. Indeed, through the slaves' rebellion, Melville proves that Africans are *not* intellectually inferior to white people and that they do *not* passively accept their status as slaves. Rather, these African slaves have proven intelligent, strategic, and self-assured in organizing a rebellion against the Spaniards. In this way, Melville proves that Delano's attitude, which denies black people's full humanity and dignity, is not only morally offensive, but also runs counter to truth. Believing in the inferiority and superiority of certain "races" does not reflect reality. Rather, it merely serves to justify the oppression of a given people.

Delano's experience thus highlights the pernicious effects of human bias. Melville shows that people often observe the world to find confirmation for their beliefs and attitudes, rather than to challenge them through true understanding. Readers are thus invited to critique Delano's naïve and racist perspective—and, in so doing, to challenge their own unconscious biases, examining the ways in which their own minds might also be limited by pre-existing assumptions about the world.

MORALITY VS. SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Benito Cereno shows that being a moral person requires more effort than simply being kind and compassionate. Beyond individual actions, morality involves recognizing the structures of power and injustice that affect different people unequally. As a respected ship captain, Amasa Delano believes that he is fair and kind because he treats white and black people with equal generosity. However, Delano's conviction that he is a good person leads him to believe that he is morally superior to others and that he is therefore meant to be protected from harm. This attitude keeps him from truly understanding other people's plights and from recognizing the injustice that others suffer from—in particular, the horrors of being a slave. By contrast, by being the victim of a slave rebellion, Don Benito Cereno has experienced first-hand the dangerous consequences that injustice and moral indifference can lead to, as it has encouraged slaves to revolt. Affected by this experience, Cereno argues that it is only by recognizing the oppression of others that people can prove fully human and moral—and, Melville suggests, that society will be able to truly progress.

Amasa Delano's understanding of morality is based on the respect of rules. Delano believes he is a good person because he has good manners and treats individuals with empathy. He proves dedicated to protecting society's formal rules. After the capture of the black slaves on the *San Dominick*, Delano keeps white sailors from killing the rebel slaves out of revenge. This highlights his belief that the rules of justice should be respected by all, and that even black slaves should be protected from extra-legal executions. This portrays him as an impartial judge and an advocate of racial equality.

However, Delano's conduct toward black people is driven by feelings of superiority and condescension. "At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs." The narrator's conclusion that Delano behaves with black people as with dogs is deeply ironic, as it suggests that Delano's courteous, "genial" attitude is nothing but a façade for racism, which will never allow him to see black people as full human beings. Instead of determining his moral worth, Delano's courteousness and abidance to the law merely conceal his morally skewed beliefs.

By focusing so much on the respect of rules, Delano remains blind to large-scale injustice and to his own participation in a system of oppression. From this perspective, instead of being morally admirable, Delano proves deluded and self-righteous. Delano trusts that his own morality is a protection against injustice. When he wonders if Cereno is trying to kill him, he concludes that this must be impossible because he is too morally admirable: "I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean." By believing that he cannot possibly be harmed, Delano suggests that terrible things happen only to people who *deserve* it. This denies the possibility of injustice. Delano's elevated sense of his own moral worth is narrowly self-centered, because it keeps him from realizing that part of what allows him to live a safe, peaceful life is a matter of power and privilege: for example, as a white man, he will never risk being enslaved by others.

In other words, Delano's focus on himself as a moral person worthy of protection denies the possibility that others, who might behave just as kindly and morally as him, might simply be less fortunate. His ignorance of other people's suffering is precisely what allows his conscience to be "clean": it is convenient for Delano to trust that the world in which his own people are in power is a just one, and to ignore the plight of black slaves. In this way, his views on morality are self-serving

and allow him to have an inflated vision of his moral worth.

At the end of the novella, Melville shows that it is only by moving away from narrowly personal experience and re-evaluating one's position in the world, in relation to oppressed human beings, that one can be fully human and moral. It is Cereno who unveils the problem at the heart of *Benito Cereno*. After Delano's men regain control over the *San Dominick*, Delano does not understand why Cereno is still depressed: "'But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? [...] You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" Cereno's answer is terse and ambiguous: "The negro," he replies. Having experienced a slave rebellion, Cereno knows through personal experience that black people are neither foolish nor passive. His comment, then, is not meant as a racist attack against black people's dignity, but, rather, as a denunciation of the terrible situation in which black people find themselves in—which, unlike Delano, he now recognizes as deeply disturbing. Through Cereno, Melville argues that ignoring the plight of others only leads to disaster, such as what Cereno has experienced on his ship. Against Delano, Cereno insists that the only way for people to prove truly moral is for them to recognize structural injustice and oppression, instead of convincing themselves that they are "saved" physically and morally—an attitude that only encourages passivity, not the righting of wrongs.

Therefore, while Delano prefers to forget about violence and cruelty, Cereno suggests that it is everyone's human responsibility to learn from the past in order to build the future. Humans can only lead a full, moral life if they address past wrongs and tackle present injustice.

VIOLENCE AND SLAVERY

What constitutes violence? When is it acceptable to use it? Are there conditions in which violence is justified and others in which it is not? Melville examines these issues in *Benito Cereno*, focusing on the topic of slavery. Although slavery is legal in the world of the novella, it involves the total dehumanization of its victims, who are treated as objects of trade. Babo's slave revolt on the *San Dominick* can be justified from this perspective, since Babo simply wishes to free himself from the Spanish slave-owners such as Don Benito Cereno and Alexandro Aranda who have oppressed him for so long. However, Babo and his companions soon take part in acts of terrifying brutality in order to assert their domination over their former masters. As a result, paradoxically, in the slaves' fight to regain control over their lives, they ultimately reproduce the very cruelty they rejected as slaves. This leads Melville to suggest that violence is cruel and inhuman whether it takes place in a legal setting (as in the case of slavery) or whether it is justified from the perspective of human dignity (as in a slave revolt). By depicting cycles of violence, Melville shows that slavery breeds violence in both the master and the slave, who are tied together in a toxic relationship of domination. In a prophetic manner, a few years before the American Civil War, Melville predicts that the very nature of slavery makes violence inevitable.

Although slavery is legal in the world of *Benito Cereno*, it is inherently cruel and dehumanizing, even when it does not involve the direct use of violence. Captain Amasa Delano knows that relationships between masters and slaves can involve violence. After Babo shaves Cereno, accidentally cutting his cheek, Babo pretends that Cereno has hit him in retribution. Shocked by Cereno's behavior, Delano laments the violence that slavery can breed: "was it to wreak in private his Spanish spite against this poor friend of his, that Don Benito, by his sullen manner, impelled me to withdraw? Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man.—Poor fellow!" Delano recognizes that being a slave-master can be cruel, as it might involve using violent behavior as punishment.

However, Delano does not understand that slavery is *inherently* violent. When he notices how intelligent and caring Babo is, he says: "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him." Although Delano means this as a compliment to Babo, his assessment that Babo is a "friend," not a slave, denies the oppressive reality of slavery itself, in which Babo does not *choose* to be kind to Cereno (as a friend might) but is *forced* to. His romantic view of Babo and Cereno's relationship thus denies the existence of violent power dynamics that deprive Babo of free will. In fact, Delano is not opposed to slavery. After noticing how loyal and efficient Babo is, Delano offers to buy him. This suggests that, like anyone involved in the slave trade, Delano sees black people as commercial goods, not as human beings worthy of dignity and agency. In this way, he dehumanizes them, accepting that their fate is bound with their master's good will.

Babo's rebellion on the ship highlights the slaves' desire for basic freedom and humanity. However, even though the slaves might be justified in revolting, the violence they take part in soon replicates the cruelty that they have been victim of. Melville thus suggests that, if slavery corrupts slave-owners, turning them into brutal tyrants, it also corrupts slaves, making them capable of brutal acts of punishment and revenge. In this way, Melville denounces violence in all its forms, whether spontaneous or state-sanctioned.

After the slaves revolt on the *San Dominick*, they take part in brutal deeds. For example, they throw Spanish sailors to the sea, where the men are bound to drown and be eaten by sharks. The act that Cereno finds most shocking is Babo's treatment of Cereno's childhood friend, Alexandro Aranda. Babo kills Aranda then cleans his skeleton in a mysterious way (which Cereno does not want to discuss and might involve cannibalism) before placing it on the figure-head of the ship. The violence Babo and his companions have experienced as

slaves makes them unrepentant about using it against their former masters.

The slaves' actions are undoubtedly cruel, but also serve practical purposes. As the new leader of the ship, Babo wants to keep the Spaniards from revolting and regaining power. He hopes that Aranda's publicly displayed skeleton will scare the Spaniards into submission and remind them that they are no longer in charge. This scene mirrors what happens to Babo at the end of the novella: after being captured and undergoing a trial, Babo is publicly executed, his head displayed on a public square for everyone to see. By establishing a parallel between Aranda's illegal murder and Babo's legal execution, Melville shows that neither act is less brutal than the other. Rather, such forms of violence are savage and morally unacceptable, as their only goal is to inspire terror and submission in others.

Through these examples, Melville aims to show that slavery corrupts the entire society, as it turns everyone—masters and slaves alike—into potential oppressors. Melville's goal is to denounce the destructive nature of slavery. In a violent system of oppression, in which slaves are not considered full human beings with rights, slaves' only hope to obtain freedom expresses itself through violence. This, in turn, does not achieve justice, but only reverses the power dynamics at play, substituting one form of violence (slavery) for another (revenge). Through its symbolic power, *Benito Cereno* can be seen as a prophetic warning to the U.S. about the war that is to come. Violence might not be acceptable or legitimate, Melville warns, but it certainly seems inevitable, as slavery is likely to end only in bloodshed.

LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

In *Benito Cereno*, Melville argues that authority based on hierarchy and order alone will never lead to a stable society. As a respected ship captain, Amasa Delano believes that maintaining discipline should be any leader's primary concern. However, Delano does not realize that, on the *San Dominick* and, more generally, in the American slave society he finds himself in, maintaining the status quo involves sustaining a fragile system of oppression in which a large part of the population is silenced. By contrast, Don Benito Cereno, who has interacted directly with the ringleader of the slave rebellion, Babo, begins to understand that sustainable leadership and authority should not depend on policing alone, but should allow all members of society to express themselves. Otherwise, Melville suggests, the pre-existing hierarchy remains fragile and illegitimate.

Delano understands good leadership as a system capable of enforcing order. Although Delano does not necessarily believe in harsh discipline and cruelty, he trusts that hierarchy is a guarantor of order. As a result, his interest in democracy and equality is an illusion. When he has to distribute water to the people on the ship, "with republican impartiality as to this republican element […] [he served] the oldest white no better than the youngest black […]. But the soft bread, sugar, and bottled cider, Captain Delano would have given the white sailors alone, and in chief Don Benito […]." Despite Delano's professed "republican" intentions, he is clearly anti-democratic, since he wants to give white passengers the more luxurious goods. He believes that democracy is not as important as traditional, racial forms of authority.

In accordance with his respect for hierarchy, Delano believes that policing—not greater equality—is the key to order. On the *San Dominick*, "Some prominent breaches not only of discipline but of decency were observed. These Captain Delano could not but ascribe, in the main, to the absence of those subordinate deck-officers to whom, along with higher duties, is entrusted what may be styled the police department of a populous ship." Delano is less interested in addressing the true problems at the root of the ship's misery than in correcting affronts to good manners and discipline. His views are short-sighted, focused on short-term problems rather than the underlying frustration and discontent on the ship.

At odds with Delano's narrow views about order and discipline, Melville suggests that following traditional authority leads not to stability but to death. The phrase "Follow your leader" appears on various occasions in the novella. The sentence is written on the side of the *San Dominick* and is used by various characters over the course of the narrative. After Babo places Alexandro Aranda's skeleton as the figure-head, the symbolic guide of the ship, he warns the Spaniards on the ship not to misbehave, threatening that otherwise they will "follow their leader"—by which he means that they will share Aranda's brutal fate. Later, Benito Cereno dies three months after Babo, leading Melville to note that Cereno thus "did, indeed, follow his leader." In both cases, the idea of following one's leader means dying—not obeying a grand purpose. The succession of deaths in the story—Aranda's, Babo's, Cereno's—suggests that a government based on hierarchy and force alone can lead to no productive outcome, since it can always be toppled by those who suffer from it.

Therefore, instead of being strictly hierarchical, Melville suggests that society should strive for the inclusion of all its members, not their submission by force. Melville suggests that hierarchical leadership and authority is not only deadly, but also unreliable. Upon entering the *San Dominick*, Delano believes that "The best account would, doubtless, be given by the captain." Delano's understanding of who is the "captain" is, of course, mistaken, since Babo and the other black slaves are secretly in charge of the ship. In fact, Babo might indeed be capable of giving a compelling account of what has happened on the ship—one that challenges Delano's basic hierarchical assumptions and forces him to address the issue of slavery—but Babo is never given the chance to express himself. On the ship, Babo's words cannot be trusted since he is merely

playing a part. Then, once Babo is recaptured, he refuses to speak: "Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words." Babo's unwillingness to speak reveals his powerlessness, but also highlights his unwillingness to engage with a system whose main purpose is to oppress black people like him, not to listen to them. In a system that does not allow him to speak, Babo's only hope for self-expression is performing "deeds" of violence, in the effort to destroy the system that has trapped him.

In this political and economic context, black and white people have inherently conflicting interests, as white people's economic prosperity depends on the slave labor of black people, and black people's liberty depends on the elimination of the white people who enslave them. Through Babo's silence, Melville suggests that no authority based on such a state of affairs can ever be fully legitimate, since it depends on the de-legitimizing and silencing of the other side. It is only once people like Babo are given the right to speak for themselves that a stable system of government will be able to emerge—one in which all members of society feel included and have a stake in building a productive society, not destroying it. Democracy involving all members of society, Melville's narrative suggests, might be the only guarantee of peace and stability.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MONKS AND MONASTERIES

Instead of reflecting piousness, the monks and monasteries in *Benito Cereno* most often highlight deception and hidden power dynamics. When Captain Delano first sees the *San Dominick*, he believes that the people on it are Dominican monks—monks whose costume consists of white and black material. In a situation in which it is unclear whether the white sailors or the black slaves are in power, the idea that everyone onboard is made of a mix of white and black is provocative. It suggests that slaves and their slave-owners are, to a certain extent, inseparable, since the existence of one requires the existence of the other. In addition, in light of the violence on the *San Dominick*, the association of the people onboard with peaceful monks is highly ironic, since there is nothing spiritual or righteous about the violence that opposes one faction against the other on the ship. Similarly, Delano later finds Babo so devoted and humble that he associates him with a monk, thus confusing outward appearances for sincerity, since Babo is in fact the leader of a brutal revolt. Therefore, at the end of the novella, Benito Cereno's decision to enter a monastery proves ambiguous, given that the only monastery previously mentioned was an illusory one: the brutal world of the *San Dominick*. Cereno's reclusion is thus not given a clear religious connotation, since his retirement can be seen as an effort to hide away from the cruelties of the world, rather than to fight for values such as justice, charity, and peace. Overall, therefore, in *Benito Cereno* the religious world of Spanish Catholic monasteries is not presented as a true alternative to the brutal system of slavery but, rather, in its unclear moral position, as an institution capable of disguising or ignoring oppression.

THE KNOT

The convoluted knot that Captain Delano sees a sailor tying aboard the *San Dominick* highlights the tense and seemingly unsolvable social situation that a slave society engenders. On the ship, Delano sees a Spanish sailor tie a knot made of various individual knots. The sailor says that he is making a knot for someone to undo and he then throws it to Delano, telling him to cut it. Finally, a slave intervenes and throws the knot into the ocean. This whole scene suggests that what is happening on the *San Dominick* is infinitely more complex and convoluted than Delano is able to recognize. The knot highlights the layers of dependence and oppression that everyone onboard is "tied up" in, as slave-owners metaphorically (and sometimes physically) tie their slaves. A slave revolt then reverses this relationship, creating new "knots." This alternation of various forms of oppression creates a seemingly unsolvable "knot" in which victims and perpetrators, and causes and consequences, are not easily identifiable. The sailor's demand that Delano cut the knot mirrors the slave's decision to throw it into the ocean: both of them think that, instead of untying the knot, which would require much patience and energy, it is easier to simply destroy it, thus erasing the convoluted past of injustice. However, this does not actually solve the root of the problem, but simply leads to new cycles of violence. Delano's cluelessness throughout this whole scene suggests that he will neither be able to untie the knot nor to cut it—and, therefore, that the "knot" of racism, slavery and injustice will remain active unless someone actually decides to tackle the problem head-on.

FLAGS

Although flags can theoretically represent positive values, such national unity and a feeling of community, in *Benito Cereno* flags (or the absence thereof) symbolize the violent ambitions that can drive groups of people to dominate over others. When Captain Delano first sees the *San Dominick*, he notices that the ship has no flag or "colors." This immediately suggests that the ship might be behaving illegally, not respecting ordinary rules of navigation. Indeed, the hierarchy on the *San Dominick* has been reversed and it is no

longer the Spanish sailors, but the African slaves, who are in charge, illegally trying to reroute the ship. Later, Delano laughs at the slave Babo's use of a Spanish flag to shave his master Benito Cereno. According to his racist beliefs, Delano concludes that this must reflect black people's infantile appreciation of bright colors. He does not understand that Babo might be using this flag intentionally, in order to remind Cereno that he—not the Spaniards—is currently in charge. These episodes question the limits between national legitimacy and piracy. Who is more legitimate: the Spanish empire and the American nation, which legalize slavery, or the slaves, who are fighting for their own liberty outside of national rules? Herman Melville does not explicitly answer this question, but he certainly suggests that nations are not inherently less piratical than other groups, since they too steal and kill. Rather, what determines legitimacy, Melville suggests, should be the *values* that symbols such as flags represent, not the mere *existence* of flags per se. In this sense, the Spanish and American nations might be just as piratical as the flag-less, slave-controlled ship.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* published in 2016.

Benito Cereno Quotes

❝ Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of 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. 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.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Benito Cereno*, the narrator presents protagonist Captain Amasa Delano in an ambiguous manner. After seeing a mysterious ship enter the harbor without a flag and noticing that it is in distress, Delano immediately resolves to go offer his help. Although this is a generous gesture on his part, typical of Delano's commitment to behave in a kind, polite way in all circumstances, the narrator suggests that it might also reveal Delano's underlying naïveté.

The narrator argues that Delano's carefree innocence derives not from rational judgment about the world's dangers but, rather, from the denial of evil. He is optimistic not because he has accurately assessed potential risks but, on the contrary, because he chooses to *ignore* them (in this case, for example, the fact that the ship's flag-less state might indicate it is a pirate ship). Delano's denial of evil, the narrator suggests, is both unrealistic and potentially harmful, since humanity *is* in fact capable of a level of cruelty and violence that Delano cannot even imagine.

The narrator's description is long-winded and ambiguous. Melville breaks up sentences in halted chunks and uses double negatives in words such as "undistrustful" to warn the reader that the message of this story is not going to be straightforward and easy to understand. Rather, in this passage, readers will have to pay close attention and use their critical thinking skills if they want to grasp the narrator's underlying message: that Delano is neither as smart nor as morally rigorous as he believes himself to be.

❝ In armies, navies, cities, or families, in nature herself, nothing more relaxes good order than misery.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator expresses one of Delano's thoughts about order and discipline. On the *San Dominick*, Delano has been surprised to discover that all people on board are miserable because they are suffering from lack of food and water. He notes that the black slaves seem to have reacted to these circumstances in aggressive ways, whereas the Spanish sailors have lost their authority over them. Delano's comment thus suggests that harsh material circumstances have the power to undermine pre-existing hierarchies.

Although Delano's view is seemingly straightforward and clear, it gains a second meaning in light of what has *actually* happened on the ship, where a slave rebellion has taken place. In this context, Delano's quote also proves correct,

but in a completely different way. Indeed, one could consider that it is the slaves' misery that has led them to revolt: furious about the injustice and hardships they have suffered as slaves, they have decided to regain control over their lives by force, overturning the power dynamics on the ship through violence. If one follows this interpretation, Delano's thought proves infinitely more complex than he himself could have imagined.

Delano, of course, is not aware that his thought could be interpreted this way, since he ignores that a slave revolt has taken place. However, this statement allows the narrator to subtly intervene in the text (through a device called dramatic irony) and warn the reader about what Delano himself does not know: that slavery's capacity to reduce an entire segment of the population to misery might lead to nothing other than brutal chaos and disorder. The narrator thus suggests that a slave revolt such as that experienced on the *San Dominick* could easily erupt not only on ships, but also in "cities," "families" and whole societies.

❝ To think that, under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched—those velvets of the Spaniard but the silky paw to his fangs.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano, Babo , Don Benito Cereno

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

After watching Benito Cereno and his servant Babo share a confidential conversation, Captain Delano begins to wonder if Cereno is secretly plotting against him. He wonders if Cereno's conspiratorial attitude could be explained by the fact that he is an impostor, a lowly sailor who is merely pretending to be a noble captain. Delano wonders about the possibility of deception as he tries to evaluate whether Cereno, who seems so weak and unhealthy, might actually be hiding his strength.

Although Delano is justified in feeling suspicious, his suspicions are misguided, since he fears Cereno, not Babo—the actual ringleader of the slave revolt and the true authority on the ship. In light of these facts, Delano's words acquire a double meaning—one that highlights his ignorance and racist prejudice.

Indeed, it is precisely Delano's understanding of black people as inferior beings marked by "infantile weakness" that keeps him from conceiving of Babo as the true conspirator. In this sense, Delano is correct in attributing violent, "savage energies" to someone on the ship—yet that person is Babo, not Cereno.

Delano's tendency to reflect on Cereno's hidden motives without ever considering that Babo is equally capable of intelligence and dissembling reveals the extent to which Delano's racist prejudice blinds him to the truth.

❝ At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano addressed the knotter:—

"What are you knotting there, my man?"

"The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.

"So it seems; but what is it for?"

"For some one else to undo," muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.

While Captain Delano stood watching him, suddenly the old man threw the knot towards him, saying in broken English,—the first heard in the ship,—something to this effect—"Undo it, cut it, quick."

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After reflecting on Benito Cereno's odd behavior and the dynamics of power on the ship, Captain Delano notices a man making a large knot out of a variety of individual knots. Unable to discern any clear pattern or logic to the man's actions, Cereno inquires about the knot's function.

This is a symbolic moment in the narrative. The Spanish sailor is indirectly trying to alert Delano to the fact that the situation on the *San Dominick* is more convoluted than Delano is able to perceive. Throwing the knot at Delano is the sailor's plea for help, asking Delano to put an end to the oppressive, seemingly unsolvable situation that slavery and the slave revolt have generated.

The knot can be assimilated to the history of the *San Dominick* and, in general, to the state of society. The accumulation of small knots into one gigantic one highlights

the complex relationships of power that characterize a slave-owning society. For example, slave-masters consider themselves superior to slaves, whom they control, but they also depend on them for subsistence. In addition, this system can generate new complications if, as happened on the ship, slaves revolt and become the new dominating force, enslaving their previous masters. Relationships of cause and consequence become increasingly difficult to unravel as the "knot" grows and individual knots (the ties of domination and subsistence that link people together) multiply.

Delano's inability to understand these complex social and political dynamics keeps him from solving the problem ("cutting" the knot) and thus foreshadows a pessimistic ending to this story—one in which it is likely that the roots of the suffering and injustice at play will never be resolved.

> All this is very queer now, thought Captain Delano, with a qualmish sort of emotion; but as one feeling incipient sea-sickness, he strove, by ignoring the symptoms, to get rid of the malady.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After a black slave gets rid of the mysterious knot by throwing it in the water, Delano feels unnerved because he realizes that he does not understand the behavior of the people around him. However, instead of paying attention to his emotions, which warn him of danger and might lead him toward the truth, he simply decides to ignore them.

This attitude is typical of Delano's behavior throughout the story. Instead of using his intelligence to delve deeper in the mysteries of the *San Dominick*, Delano often molds his own thoughts to reassure himself. His goal is not to challenge his pre-conceptions about the world but to maintain a cheerful, friendly attitude throughout every ordeal.

However, as the narrator's comparison between Delano's attitude and sea-sickness suggests, ignoring emotional discomfort ("symptoms") does not actually mean that the root of this discomfort ("sea-sickness") will disappear. Rather, it means that Delano is remaining blind to reality—and that the real state of affairs (in this case, the slave revolt) is then likely to take him by surprise.

In general, Delano's thoughts show that he is more concerned with issues of politeness and good manners than with reflecting on morality and truth. When it comes to racial relations and the legitimacy of slavery, Delano prefers to remain in the safe, comfortable world of his illusions than to face reality. In doing so, he is simply blinding himself to underlying dangers and injustice.

> Am I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano (speaker), Don Benito Cereno

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As Captain Delano reflects on Benito Cereno's unstable moods and strange questions, he begins to wonder if Cereno might harbor evil intentions, such as the desire to kill Delano. However, Delano immediately rejects this idea in a playful, naïvely optimistic way.

Delano's rejection hinges on what he considers to be realistic and morally just. To him, it is highly *unlikely* that people would engage in extreme violence. This explains why he rejects the idea that the *San Dominick* might be a "pirate-ship" (which it actually is). In addition, he considers it *morally impossible* that evil would ever harm a person with a "clean" conscience.

Delano's moral beliefs are flawed in two important ways. First of all, he believes that his own opinion about how "clean" his conscience is actually reflects his moral worth—a characteristic that, logically, should be determined from an objective observer on the outside, not from the subject himself. Secondly, he assumes that misfortune only happens to people who deserve it. This belief denies the existence of injustice, the idea that even morally admirable people can suffer from events beyond their control—for example, that slaves might be just as morally upright as Delano, but suffer terrible injustice.

Delano's attitude about the world is thus a mix of denial and arrogance. This keeps him from accurately assessing risk and explains his surprise when he discovers that, unlike what he believed, the *San Dominick* is actually ruled by

violence, terror, and injustice.

> There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers [...]. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano (speaker), Don Benito Cereno, Babo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When he sees how carefully Babo shaves Benito Cereno, Delano concludes that Babo's skill must be typical of all black people. Through the unfolding of *Benito Cereno*, Herman Melville demonstrates how wrong and morally flawed such racist stereotypes are.

Although Delano believes that his admiration for Babo's skill proves that he is capable of recognizing black people's talent and dignity, it actually proves the opposite: that Delano considers black people to be naturally inferior. He trusts that black people take simple pleasure in everything they do, including performing their tasks as a slave. In this way, he abides by typical stereotypes about black people as people meant for song and entertainment. This denies black people the same intellectual potential as white people, suggesting that they are naturally happy (or, at least, not necessarily *unhappy*) even when they are condemned to slavery.

Instead of reflecting on the moral implications of his thoughts, Delano simply believes that what he sees is the way it should be. For example, he thinks that if black people demonstrate talent as servants or hair-dressers, it must mean that such skill is innate and that they enjoy such tasks—not, as is actually the case, that black slaves have no choice but to develop limited skills. Delano is unable to imagine a world not ruled by slavery, in which both black and white people might be given the resources to fully develop their whole potential as human beings.

Melville later shows that all the qualities Delano believes to have perceived in Babo are nothing but pretense. What Delano considers to be an innocent scene in which Babo is pleasantly shaving his master is nothing but a performance to hide the fact that Babo is *much more* than a valet: he is in control of Cereno's life and hides his threatening gestures with feigned cheerfulness. There is, in that sense, nothing "natural" about Babo's simulated servitude.

> At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.

Related Characters: Babo , Captain Amasa Delano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

After Delano's complimentary observations about Babo's skill as a barber, the narrator intervenes to summarize Delano's views about race. Although the narrator's tone initially appears to be neutral and descriptive, it soon proves scathing and ironic: instead of praising Delano's sense of camaraderie, the narrator concludes that Delano considers black people similar to dogs.

Focused on good manners, Delano believes that it is his politeness and friendliness that determines his moral worth, since it shows that he interacts with black people just as kindly as with white people. What Delano does not realize is that it is not necessarily his acts per se that determine their moral quality, but the values that underpin them. In this case, Delano behaves kindly with black people but also considers them inferior. His kindness, therefore, does not reflect a belief in a greater principle such as equality but, on the contrary, a form of condescension, which is not moral at all.

The narrator thus suggests that people should not be judged on mere acts of kindness or compassion, which can stem from a variety of different value systems and beliefs. Rather, it is only by examining the principles that lie *behind* one's actions that the true moral value of the deed can come

to light.

"The castle and the lion," exclaimed Captain Delano—"why Don Benito, this is the flag of Spain you use here. It's well it's only I, and not the King, that sees this," he added with a smile, "but"—turning towards the black,—"it's all one, I suppose, so the colors be gay;" which playful remark did not fail somewhat to tickle the negro.

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano (speaker), Don Benito Cereno, Babo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

When Babo shaves Cereno, Delano notices that Babo tucks a small Spanish flag under Cereno's chin instead of an ordinary apron. Underestimating Babo's knowledge and intellectual capacities, as usual, Delano believes that Babo does not know what the flag represents and is simply attracted by its bright colors—a childish fascination that Delano believes is typical of black people in general.

By denying the possibility that Babo might be perfectly aware of the symbolic nature of what he doing, Delano does not realize that Babo *is* in fact intentionally desecrating the Spanish flag. This allows Babo to secretly remind Cereno of his power over him now that slaves are in charge of the ship. More generally, it conveys Babo's contempt for the Spanish empire, the colonial power that has enslaved him. Delano himself, who considers some aspects of the "Old World" archaic, does not necessarily hold the Spanish empire in high enough esteem to be offended by this scene.

This scene introduces the topic of international relations in the narrative. It serves as a reminder that colonialism and the slave trade serve the interests of expansionist powers whose main goal, in subduing indigenous people, is not to respect their rights but to assert violent dominance over them—a process that Babo here attempts to reverse.

Is it possible, thought Captain Delano; was it to wreak in private his Spanish spite against this poor friend of his, that Don Benito, by his sullen manner, impelled me to withdraw? Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man.—Poor fellow!

Related Characters: Captain Amasa Delano (speaker), Don Benito Cereno, Babo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

After Babo cuts Cereno while shaving him—in a gesture that remains ambiguously accidental—Babo shows Delano a wound he claims Cereno has just inflicted him as retribution for Babo's earlier shaving mistake.

Delano does not know that Babo is pretending to be the victim of Cereno's wrath (when in fact Babo is the one who holds all the power over Cereno). Therefore, Delano is outraged by this excessive punishment that Cereno has inflicted on his servant. As is typical of Delano's tendency to think of people in terms of their cultural or racial identity, Delano (mistakenly) assumes that Cereno's behavior is a reflection of his Spanish cultural background.

For the first time, though, Delano also realizes that slavery can make people behave in ways that are not acceptable. Delano seems capable of denouncing what he considers to be unnecessary cruelty. At the same time, though, this thinking is extremely limited. Delano does not act on this thought. He never reproaches Cereno for his behavior nor takes any action to protect the slaves. Delano's general indifference to slaves' inner lives and physical well-being suggests that his compassion is temporary and limited, offended more by what he perceives as a breach in good manners than by the inherent violence of slavery.

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. He smote Babo's hand down, but his own heart smote him harder. With infinite pity he withdrew his hold from Don Benito. Not Captain Delano, but Don Benito, the black, in leaping into the boat, had intended to stab.

Both the black's hands were held, as, glancing up towards 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.

Related Characters: Don Benito Cereno, Babo , Captain Amasa Delano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

After Delano leaves the *San Dominick*, Cereno jumps in Delano's boat, soon followed by Babo who tries to kill Cereno. This sequence of events finally reveals the truth to Delano: the slaves have organized a rebellion and taken over the *San Dominick*.

This moment of revelation is a turning point in the story. It allows Delano—and the readers, who have inevitably followed Delano's point of view—to realize that what they thought was real was, in fact, nothing but an illusion. The slaves are not docile, as Delano believed, but "ferocious." Similarly, Babo was not friendly and devoted, but intent on destroying his former master. In other words, all of Delano's stereotypical beliefs and observations about black people's happiness as slaves are demolished.

This highlights how much Delano's ignorance and intolerance ("benighted" in the same way he believed the slaves to be) have kept him from gaining access to the truth. It is only through violent deeds that he is forced to confront reality.

Foreshadowing the Civil War, this episode presciently suggests that if all Americans are as naïve and foolish as Delano in their racial attitudes, they will only come to terms with the violence that underpins slavery once their own lives are at risk—through slave revolts and, perhaps, through war.

If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open to-day.

Related Characters: Don Benito Cereno

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

When Benito Cereno testifies at the trial in Lima, meant to judge the slave rebellion, he shares his full experience as ship captain of the *San Dominick*. Although the narrator could potentially conclude the story here, showing that Cereno's perspective complements Delano's sufficiently to provide an accurate picture of what has happened on the ship, the narrator merely says that Cereno's testimony *might* be the key to the story—but is probably *not*.

By couching the importance of Cereno's testimony in ambiguous words, the narrator thus encourages the reader to reflect on what the actual causes and consequences (or "complications") of the slave rebellion might be. What other testimony besides Cereno's might be useful to illuminate this entire series of events?

Although the narrator does not say it explicitly, he suggests that the perspective of the black slaves (who are never given a voice) might be more useful than Cereno's in delineating the true motives behind the rebellion. The narrator also suggests that no single perspective might be sufficient—but, rather, that the issue of slavery and violence is so vast that it extends beyond individuals, affecting the entire society itself.

"You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves."

"Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied; "because they are not human."

Related Characters: Don Benito Cereno, Captain Amasa Delano (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

When Delano and Cereno make their way to Peru after the *San Dominick* has been recaptured, Cereno notes that the only reason Delano ever discovered the truth about the slave revolt was because he was forced to. Reflecting on this, he expresses the wish that everyone might one day see beyond their flawed beliefs about the world. Finding these words gloomy and depressing, Delano tries to brighten Cereno's spirits by encouraging him to forget about everything he has seen.

Delano's comment suggests that, unlike what Cereno believes, even Delano has not fully learned to see beyond his illusions. As usual, Delano prefers to ignore discomfort and adopts a narrowly optimistic outlook instead of actually confronting long-existing problems. Despite considering himself an exceptionally moral being, Delano here proves shallow and small-minded. He does not believe in questioning himself or the moral nature of the world. Rather, he believes that the purpose of his life is to think exclusively of the present and the future, thus eschewing any moral responsibility he (or others) might have toward the rest of society.

Cereno, by contrast, understands this perspective to be illogical and inhumane, because it denies the validity of emotions and the opportunity for people to repair past wrongs—and, in so doing, prevent future disasters.

❝ "You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The negro."

Related Characters: Don Benito Cereno, Captain Amasa Delano (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novella, Benito Cereno finally spells out the problem at the heart of the story—though in a highly ambiguous way. Delano, who is simply happy to be alive, does not understand why Cereno is still so pensive and depressed after escaping the *San Dominick*. Cereno, in turn, does not understand Delano's narrowly self-centered attitude and remains concerned by everything he has discovered throughout the slave revolt.

Cereno's response that the root of his unhappiness is "the negro" is not meant in a racist way, as most of Delano's racial comments are. Unlike Delano, Cereno has witnessed first-hand the intelligence and self-confidence that black slaves are capable of, when they are allowed to express themselves (even if, on the *San Dominick*, self-expression always involves violence). Therefore, unlike Delano, he does not consider black people inferior to white people. Rather, what Cereno means to denounce is slavery itself and the position of black people in society: the way in which they are humiliated, dehumanized, and traded as objects—which, as Cereno has seen, is capable of building long-term resentment and a desire for vengeance.

By "the negro," Cereno therefore means to denounce the entire structure of slavery and oppression that is not only—as he now realizes—morally offensive but also capable of destroying everyone's lives, including white people's. Concerned about the well-being of society, Cereno realizes that slavery is destructive for everyone involved. By contrast, Delano remains unconcerned, preferring to believe in the illusion of a fair, peaceful world.

❝ Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader.

Related Characters: Alexandro Aranda, Don Benito Cereno, Babo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

After the trial in Lima, Babo and the other slaves receive capital punishment and their heads are displayed on a public square. This ending highlights various moral issues at play in *Benito Cereno*.

First of all, it becomes apparent that Babo has never actually been given a voice. He has been "voiceless" throughout the narrative because the reader has never heard him express his sincere emotions and thoughts.

Instead, readers have only been able to see his plotting, strategic self, and have not been given access to the true motivations behind Babo's acts.

Furthermore, it also becomes clear that, through his intelligence, Babo has exercised a powerful influence over his former masters. Babo's skull stares directly at Aranda (whom he has killed) and Cereno (whom he has traumatized). This suggests that, even in death, Babo retains an attitude of domination and defiance, one that attempts to hold his former masters accountable—or, perhaps, to punish them—for their role as slave-owners. The possibility that Cereno's final "leader" could be Babo emphasizes this interpretation, in which Babo is the true (yet hidden and mysterious) driver of the narrative.

Whether the "leader" mentioned at the end is Babo or Aranda, the similar fate that Aranda, Cereno, and Babo share—namely, death—suggests, on a symbolic level, that these men's destinies are all interconnected. In a slave society, slaves and masters (or, more generally, leaders and followers) depend on each other to survive, even if their relationships are marked by brutal domination. Oppression always involves violence—whether in the maintenance or in the destruction of it. Therefore, in such a system, "following one's leader" inevitably means killing and/or dying.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BENITO CERENO

In 1799, an American ship captain, Amasa Delano, from Duxbury, Massachusetts, has anchored his trader ship in a bay near the coast of Chile. The next day, the climate and the general environment around the ship are overwhelmingly dark and mysterious, as the fog, the sea, and the birds flying overhead are all gray. In this foreboding atmosphere, Captain Delano notices a ship enter the bay. Delano is shocked to notice that the boat carries no **flag**. Although Delano's ship is in an isolated spot and it is not uncommon to hear violent tales in this area of the world, he remains self-assured and at peace, unwilling to believe that someone could harm him. The narrator notes that, although this signals Delano's generosity of spirit, readers are invited to make up their mind about his intelligence from this episode.

The opening moments of Benito Cereno *are full of symbolism and hidden signals about important themes in the novella and events that are to come. The absence of a flag on the* San Dominick *is an early indication that there is something piratical about it and that it is not following ordinary, formal procedures. The story will later examine what it means to be a pirate in a period in which slavery is legal—and what types of violence might be legitimate. Delano's self-confidence despite warning signs of danger is typical of his character. It signals both his natural optimism and his lack of foresight and perceptiveness.*

Following the ship's course, Delano notices that it moves hesitantly and ambiguously, at times coming close to the shore, and at others shifting direction. Delano concludes that this ship might be experiencing difficulties and resolves to help it get to shore. Taking some fish with him to give as a gift, Delano approaches the ship in a boat. Through the thick gray fog, Delano notices that the boat looks like a white European monastery, and he thinks that, from a distance, he can see Dominican **monks** walking on board. When he finally comes close enough, he realizes that this ship is in fact a Spanish slave ship carrying its cargo through various ports in the colonies.

The gray atmosphere creates not only an atmosphere of mystery, but it also highlights—since gray is a mix of white and black—that this story is going to reveal complex, convoluted racial dynamics, in which confusion about what it means to be "white" or "black" will emerge. Delano's interpretation of the San Dominick *crew as Dominican monks, who wear a uniform made of white and black garments, reinforces this impression that, in a period of slavery, racial dynamics are difficult to analyze separately, when the livelihood of the (white) master depends on the presence of (black) slaves.*

Delano notices that the ship is in disrepair. He compares its bare, devastated structure to the bones in Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones. He sees no guns and is not able to recognize a figure-head because that section of the ship is wrapped in fabric. He does, however, notice a blazon decorated with various mythological creatures, including a masked satyr stepping on another masked figure. On the side of the ship, the sentence "*Seguid vuestro jefe*" (Follow your leader) is written next to the name of the ship, *San Dominick*.

In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, God shows a valley of bones to the prophet Ezekiel. After God instructs Ezekiel to breathe into the bones, they miraculously gather together and become alive, covered in flesh. In the Biblical text, this vision represents the future of the people of Israel, who are currently enslaved but will one day be restored physically and spiritually by God. Delano's comparison thus hints to the slaves' effort to obtain freedom on the San Dominick.

Delano is able to board the ship and is surprised to note that the black slaves are far more numerous than the Spanish sailors. As soon as he enters, everyone begins to tell him about their misadventures: after an epidemic of scurvy, they suffered violent storms and near shipwreck, followed by a period of extreme calm, which caused them to deplete their provisions without moving forward. The narrator compares Delano's feelings of surprise and estrangement with the emotions that a traveler might experience upon discovering a new house in a foreign country. This impression is enhanced by the mystery that surrounds ships, which appear and disappear according to the whims of the sea.

Despite noticing that the black slaves are more numerous than the white sailors, Delano does not conceive that this could mean that the actual balance of power is reversed. Rather, the narrator's mention of a foreign country suggests that Delano is out of his depth in this situation: he believes that this is an ordinary setting, in which the white sailors have more power than the blacks, and does not realize that nothing on the San Dominick *reflects what he is used to in the slave society of the U.S. It is precisely Delano's ignorance that keeps him from being critical in evaluating his surroundings.*

In this state of mind, Delano notices bizarre dynamics. He sees a group of "oakum-pickers": four old black slaves on an elevated deck who, unlike the excited crowd below, are lying down in surreal tranquility, singing drearily as though they were chanting at a funeral, while picking the strands of old ropes to re-use the loose fibers. He also notices six slaves (whom Delano calls "Ashantee conjurors") polishing hatchets. Delano notes that these men's attitude is typical of blacks, who always combine work and entertainment. These, he notes, unlike the rest of the group, look like "unsophisticated Africans."

The groups of black slaves are subtly menacing, both because of their activities (such as polishing hatchets) and their attitudes (singing funeral-like songs), which evoke danger and violence. Although this does make Delano feel uncomfortable, his belief in black people's lack of intelligence and his passive acceptance of slavery keeps him from understanding that the men's attitude is mere pretense, allowing them to pretend to be occupied while secretly being prepared to fight.

After observing these characters, Delano seeks the captain of the ship, whom he discovers to be Don Benito Cereno, a gentlemanly Spaniard whose mournful attitude reveals the psychological hardship he has endured. Cereno is constantly accompanied by a black slave, Babo, who is seemingly devoted to his master in the same way a shepherd's dog might be. Delano offers to help the captain, orders the fish to be brought up, and orders his sailors on the boat to return with water and more provisions.

The comparison of Babo to a dog highlights Delano's willingness to consider black people inferior and animal-like. By contrast, Delano's eagerness to share provisions with the San Dominick *reveals his generosity and his desire never to behave un-courteously. This suggests that bad qualities (such as racism) can coexist with seemingly good qualities (such as politeness and generosity) in the same person. It is not necessarily easy to distinguish between "good" and "bad" people at first glance.*

Grateful that he will be able to speak with the sailors thanks to his knowledge of Spanish, Delano concludes that everyone looks as though they have suffered tremendously. He feels compassion for the slaves and sailors alike, but believes that a more energetic leader than Benito Cereno could probably have prevented the general atmosphere of chaos palpable on the ship. Benito Cereno is visibly weak and distressed, unable to perform basic functions on his own, as he seems too overwhelmed by mental suffering. As a result, Babo helps him in every single basic function. To Delano, Babo's caring, friendly attitude is typical of blacks, whose docility makes them "less a servant than a devoted companion." Delano is impressed with Babo's efficiency, which contrasts so starkly with the other black slaves' rowdiness and the Spanish sailors' ineptitude.

Delano's empathy for the difficulties that everyone on the San Dominick *has experienced extends to both the sailors and the slaves. However, Delano's compassion only derives from what he can see and understand (the idea of scurvy and a storm), as well as the fact that the white people on board are also affected. When it comes to slavery, which Delano has never experienced and which does not affect whites, Delano is incapable to conceive of this system as demeaning or oppressive. Rather, he seems to believe that black people willingly participate in slavery, deriving friendship from it. Furthermore, although his observations about Babo's skills should lead him to conclude that he is wrong about black people's lack of intelligence, he remains incapable of reasoning in this way, preferring instead to believe in black people's inferiority despite evidence to the contrary.*

Delano is also frustrated by Benito Cereno's moodiness and passivity, which makes Cereno behave rudely toward Delano despite Delano's warm attitude. However, Delano tries to keep from judging Cereno too harshly, reminding himself that the ship captain has experienced physical hardship and that he behaves unpleasantly with everyone on board, regardless of status and skin color. Delano is astounded to note that Cereno puts his servant Babo in charge of giving out orders, thus behaving not in the dictatorial role that he can exert on a ship, but in an apathetic, feeble way.

Delano's perception of other people is generally limited to their social actions. This leads Delano to pay a lot of attention to Cereno's mood swings rather than to signs of danger that might come from elsewhere. His criticism of Cereno's apathy also highlights his belief that a captain should enforce a rigid hierarchy to maintain discipline and order on a ship. His focus on hierarchy and convention keeps him from understanding that other people, such as Babo, might actually be in charge.

Delano wonders if Cereno might be behaving this way because he believes that showing detachment gives him more clout. However, Delano notices that episodes revealing unruliness and lack of good manners are common on the ship. Delano concludes that they should be resolved through better policing, which would be able to restore order. Although the old oakum-pickers sometimes intervene to remind their companions to behave, Delano believes that the harsh authority of a sailor would be much more effective.

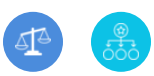
Once again, Delano is not able to see the oakum-pickers' disciplinary role as a sign that black people might actually be in control of the ship. His focus on policing reveals a conservative understanding of order and social harmony, based on vertical hierarchy and the threat of force rather than on popular consensus. By focusing solely on good manners, though, Delano does not realize that the lack of discipline reflects much deeper troubles on the ship, which simple policing would not be able to solve.

Curious to better understand the *San Dominick*'s misadventures, Delano resolves to interrogate the person who would best be able to relate them: the captain. However, when Delano asks Cereno for more details about the *San Dominick*'s voyage, Cereno is distraught and looks at Delano blankly, as though he has entered a stupor. Cereno recounts that the ship left Buenos Aires for Lima with a cargo of black slaves and other goods. They encountered stormy weather near Cape Horn, which killed some of Cereno's best officers. During Cereno's recounting, he becomes so distraught that he coughs heavily. Babo is forced to support him physically, wrapping an arm around him while staring constantly into his eyes out of concern.

Babo's gesture of wrapping his arm around Cereno is misleading. It suggests that Babo is helping Cereno, when he is in fact controlling the Spanish captain, physically and mentally encircling him so that Cereno has to obey Babo's secret orders. Throughout the story, Babo's proximity, which he disguises as concern for his master, is nothing but an effort to control Cereno's every act and remind Cereno that he will never be able to escape. Similarly, every time Cereno is distraught, it is because he is remembering the horrors of the slave revolt, which he cannot communicate to Delano and must instead conceal.

Babo intervenes, lamenting his master's physical and mental state and saying that Cereno is overwhelmed by the memory of the plague that followed the storm. Cereno then resumes his narrative, recounting the scurvy that killed many sailors and slaves alike. The ship was too damaged to follow its course and was carried to new territory, where the wind suddenly ceased and, in the calm that lasted days, fever broke. Although they tried on various occasions to reach harbor when the winds returned, they drifted back and forth, unable to reach the shore.

Babo's intervention, which he disguises as compassion, actually serves to remind *Cereno of the narrative that he is supposed to tell if he does not want Babo to kill him. The fact that Babo so often seems benevolent, when in fact his compassion is simply a means for him to assert his control over Cereno and the whole situation, shows that a person's true motives are difficult to discern. In the same way, then, the reader is invited to doubt Delano's own compassion, which conceals hidden assumptions about power and hierarchy.*



At the end of this story, Cereno praises the black slaves for their calm conduct throughout this entire ordeal. He adds that he owes his survival to Babo. While Babo humbly reiterates that he only obeyed his duty, Delano, impressed by what he has heard, concludes that Babo is a true friend and cannot be called a slave. He then marvels at the closeness of the two men, as Babo supports his master, keeping him from feeling weak. Noticing the difference in the richness of the two men's clothing, Delano realizes that Babo, in his pious attitude and humble attire, looks like a Franciscan **monk**.

In light of the slave revolt that has taken place, Cereno's words are highly ironic, since the black slaves have proven to be canny and assertive, not benevolent with their captors. Babo and Cereno's exchange is thus a grotesque show of submission, as Cereno's praise only underlines his terror of Babo. The conclusions that Delano draws are thus completely mistaken, to the point of becoming ridiculous: where there is oppression and violence, Delano only sees goodwill and friendship. Babo's seemingly pious attitude only disguises his secret ambitions.

Reflecting on this situation, Delano is struck by Cereno's description of the terrible calm that the *San Dominick* experienced and concludes that this must be in part due to inept seamanship. However, Delano then feels guilty for judging Cereno harshly and decides to focus on his compassion for the frail Spanish captain. He reiterates his promise to help Cereno and his crew as best he can, with water, materials to repair the ship, and even sailors who might serve as deck officers. Upon hearing these words, Cereno's face suddenly shows gratefulness and enthusiasm. However, Babo whispers that Cereno must not become over-excited and takes Cereno aside to share a private conversation with him. When Cereno returns, he is gloomy again, to Delano's disappointment.

Delano's constant fear of having offensive or impolite thoughts keeps him from exercising critical thinking. At the same time, his compassion also suggests that he is willing to re-examine his own thoughts and humbly accept that he does not have the right to judge other people or the capability to fully understand their circumstances. This attitude is not necessarily harmful but, throughout the story, it highlights Delano's preference to ignore uncomfortable thoughts rather than to reflect deeply on the contradictions he is faced with. Cereno's excitement about receiving extra white sailors reveals his hope that he might be freed—which Babo then proceeds to crush.

Cereno then invites Delano to follow him to an elevated deck to the rear of the ship, the poop deck, where some pleasant wind might be blowing. Cereno tells Delano to precede him on the ladder, which makes Delano nervous, close to panic, although he cannot explain why. When they safely reach the poop, Delano notices a shocking scene of disobedience: a black slave in a group below, angered by one of the white sailors' words, hits him with a knife on the head. Cereno dismisses the episode as sport, but Delano says that, on his ship, the *Bachelor's Delight*, he would have ordered instant punishment. Delano does not understand Cereno's apathy and is frustrated by his behavior. He tells Cereno that he should keep his slaves busy at all times, in order to avoid disorder. To Delano's advice, Cereno mutters that Delano is right, but he fails to act on it.

Cereno's instinctive panic suggests that there is something on the ship that Cereno subconsciously recognizes as dangerous, even if his thoughts are not able to express it through words. Cereno's concern about the violence he witnesses contrasts with his later condemnation of the gash that he believes Cereno to have inflicted on Babo's cheek. In both cases, he condemns the violence as unacceptable. However, it is only when the violence subverts the pre-existing hierarchy that Delano considers it punishable. When violence affects slaves, by contrast, Delano considers it an unfortunate, yet inevitable, aspect of life.

Delano interrogates Cereno about the role of the oakum pickers and the hatchet-polishers, but Cereno answers with vague mutterings. When Delano asks Cereno who owns the slaves, Don Benito replies that his friend Alexandro Aranda used to. Recalling his friend's death—because of the fever, Cereno confirms—Cereno, overcome by emotion, begins to shake and Babo has to support him again. Trying to comfort Cereno, Delano shares with him a similar experience of losing a friend while on sea. He notes that, instead of throwing the body to the sharks, he would have been comforted to keep the corpse on board. However, when Delano mentions this, Cereno cries out in shock, terrified, and Babo intervenes, gesturing to Delano that they should change topics so as not to upset his master any more.

Cereno's mention of Aranda suggests that the ship has already changed leadership once, and that changes in leadership, in Benito Cereno, *most often take place through death. Although Delano is well intentioned in trying to comfort Cereno, he does not yet know that his comments about Aranda's body force Cereno to remember that his friend's skeleton* is *on the ship, serving as the figure-head, after Babo ordered Aranda to be brutally killed. In light of the slave revolt, this episode once again highlights Delano's utter cluelessness, since he has no way of knowing that the deaths on the ship were the result of brutal murders, not illness.*

A bell on the ship then rings ten o'clock and an imposing, tall black slave walks toward Benito Cereno. He is kept tied by a chain wrapped around his body, connected to his neck by a metallic collar. Babo murmurs that Atufal walks like a mute and Cereno recoils in shock. Babo encourages Cereno to ask his usual question and Cereno follows his advice, asking Atufal if he is ready to ask his pardon. However, Atufal refuses to ask forgiveness. Despite being chained, he seems to have resigned himself to his situation.

This strange scene seemingly highlights the tyrannical power a slave-owner has over his slaves, as Benito Cereno has kept Atufal chained simply because the man refused to ask for Cereno's pardon. However, in light of the slave revolt that has actually taken place on the ship, this scene proves grotesque, since Babo and Atufal are actually the ones who hold power of life and death over Cereno, even though Cereno is not visibly kept in chains. This scene thus highlights the cycles of violence that can tie a slave-owner to a slave, and a slave to their former master.

After Atufal leaves, Delano demands an explanation and Cereno says that Atufal has committed an unacceptable act. Cereno hesitates and looks at Babo before pursuing his explanation. He says that for sixty days, every two hours, Atufal must come ask for his forgiveness. When Delano discovers that Atufal has complied with this punishment, he concludes that Atufal must have "a royal spirit in him." Cereno then notes that Atufal was indeed a monarch in his native country. Babo intervenes, confirming what Cereno has said and adding the he, on the contrary, was already a slave in Africa. Delano is annoyed by Babo's interruption but Cereno does not return his surprised glance.

Delano's surprise at Atufal's "royal spirit" is ambiguous. It suggests that, to be "royal," one must exhibit patience, resignation and good manners instead of revolting through violence. Although this seemingly endows Atufal with a nobility that Delano's racist beliefs do not usually attribute to black people, it also emphasizes that slaves should remain passive to emphasize their goodness. The fact that Babo was a slave before being traded by the Spanish highlights the fact that slavery does not only take place between white and black people, but can involve the enslavement of black slaves by black people—and, therefore, that Melville's narrative aims to criticize slavery in all its forms, regardless of the skin color of the actors involved.

Delano suggests that Cereno should let Atufal free since he seems so compliant, but Babo mutters that Cereno will never do this. He shows Delano that a key hangs from Cereno's neck that can open Atufal's chains. After Delano makes an innocent, playful comment about Cereno's key and, by extension, his power over this slave, Cereno seems agitated, and Delano concludes that Cereno must be frustrated not to have succeeded yet in forcing the slave to ask for forgiveness.

Delano's comment about setting Atufal free seemingly denounces the cruelty of certain types of punishment. However, his point of view is purely pragmatic, aimed at maintaining peace on the ship, and his later joke about Cereno's power over Atufal suggests that Delano finds certain aspects of slavery amusing. This good humor contrasts darkly with the actual reality: that Cereno has only illusory power over Babo and Atufal.

Afterwards, Cereno and Babo begin to whisper to each other, apart from Delano. He notices that Cereno no longer looks dignified and that Babo has lost his naïve grace. Irked by the two men's impolite behavior, Delano looks around him and sees a Spanish sailor walk beneath, looking intently at Delano. When Delano looks back at Cereno and Babo, he has the feeling that they have been talking about him. This puts him ill at ease and offends him, as he feels that Cereno has been behaving extremely disrespectfully.

Although the many moments in which Cereno and Babo talk among themselves could alert Delano to the fact that his understanding of hierarchy and power on the San Dominick *is more complicated than it appears and that Babo might play an important role in its organization, Delano's focus on good manners and politeness often keeps him from examining the less superficial aspects of the social behavior he witnesses.*

Delano wonders if Cereno's mysterious behavior could be explained by the fact that he is crazy, since a fully sane, gentlemanly captain would never treat Delano the way Cereno has. He wonders, too, if Cereno might be an impostor, some ordinary sailor pretending to have always been a captain. However, when he looks more carefully at Cereno, Delano concludes that Cereno's profile looks noble, and that he is probably indeed a Cereno, an important trading family. Feeling guilty for doubting his host, Delano reassures himself by concluding that the true reasons behind Cereno's behavior might remain unknown, but are probably not harmful. He decides to remain open-minded and civil, so as not to cause offense.

Delano's attempts to reason about the deep causes of Cereno's behavior show that he is capable of using his intelligence in a critical way, potentially able to unveil the truth of what is happening on the San Dominick. *However, these efforts are always crushed by Delano's focus on physical appearances. His association of Cereno's face with nobility shows that he believes that one's physical appearance and family name are sufficient to determine one's character—a belief in line with his racist opinions. In addition, his association of critical thinking with an offense to good manners also keeps him from exploring his thoughts further.*

Cereno then approaches Delano and interrogates him about his ship. Delano tells him that they have been in this harbor for a couple of days, that he is carrying some goods and silver, and that he has twenty-five men on board. Cereno insists on collecting precise information and asks Delano if these men would be on the ship tonight, as well. Hesitant, not understanding Cereno's questions, Delano says that some of his men had thought of going fishing at midnight. When Cereno asks, Delano adds that they have some arms in case of emergency. Cereno then keeps quiet and returns to Babo, where he begins to whisper once more.

This scene reveals the extent to which Delano's politeness could potentially allow others to take advantage of his naïveté. Because of Delano's previous commitment not to offend his host Cereno, Delano has a warm, sincere attitude, assuming that Cereno is also honest and well intentioned when, in fact, Cereno is dissembling as he follows Babo's orders. Once again, Delano's underlying belief—based on racism and naïveté—that a black slave like Babo could never be in charge keeps him from even contemplating that possibility.

Finding that Babo and Cereno look like conspirators and confused about Cereno's questions, Delano once again begins to wonder if Cereno might have ulterior motives. Despite Delano's naturally trusting personality, he becomes suspicious again. Adopting a cheerful attitude, he asks Cereno about the strikingly close relationship the Spanish captain has with his black slave, who behaves like a personal counselor. Cereno looks dismayed and, after composing himself, tells Delano that he does indeed trust Babo. Babo, in turn, smiles at Delano and, after his master's reply, modifies what Delano perceives as an animal-like smile into one that reveals intelligence. Cereno becomes gloomy again but Delano, committed to behaving courteously, makes a pleasant comment before walking off on his own.

Even when Delano proves suspicious of Cereno and Babo's relationship, he never once considers that Babo could be the one in control. Instead, Delano focuses on Cereno's potential craziness or hidden motives, as well as on the ways that Cereno has offended him. This highlights the deeply limiting effects that racism has on the mind, as it keeps Delano from understanding that everyone on board, including the slaves, are capable of intelligent, devious deeds. Even Delano's perception that Babo can shift from appearing passive and stupid to displaying quickness of mind does not alert Delano to the fact that Babo *might be pretending to be someone he is not.*

Delano walks off for a few moments and notices a young Spanish sailor hide a glittering object from view. Realizing that this is the same man Delano had noticed before, Delano wonders if that man is hiding a secret, some precious object he has stolen. Moved by these suspicious thoughts, Delano reflects again on Cereno's odd questions. At every one of his thoughts, Delano notices that the old black slaves whom he calls the "wizards of Ashantee" strike their hatchets, which contributes to the overall eerie atmosphere.

Paradoxically, all of Delano's suspicions relate to white people's behaviors. The sailor's glittering object is only a partial clue to what has happened on the San Dominick, *since, as Cereno later explains, it is a precious jewel that the sailor intends to bring to a shrine Lima as a sign of gratitude for surviving. By contrast, it is the hatchet-polishing slaves who should actually arouse Delano's interest, since their actions highlight the underlying violence capable of exploding on the ship.*

Influenced by this foreboding environment, Delano feels uncomfortable about Cereno. He wonders if this ship is a pirate ship, although he immediately tries to reassure himself, noting that it is unlikely that a ship reduced to such a miserable state would make plans for anything but water and food. At the same time, he wonders if part of the crew might be hidden somewhere, waiting to attack. Although Delano is aware of many stories involving pirates, he has never fully believed them. Reflecting on Cereno's attitude and mode of speech, Delano concludes that there is a deceptive quality to him, which suggests that he may be lying. At the same time, everyone on the ship—through both their words and their aspect—constitutes proof that Cereno's narrative must be true. Otherwise, Delano reflects, every single person on the ship would be lying and pretending to be something they are not, which is too absurd to believe.

Once again, even though Delano's instincts take him on the right track (becoming suspect of everyone's behavior around him, and realizing that people's attitudes might be simulated), he ultimately disregards his suspicions by appealing to a reassuring idea of the world, one in which large groups of people are not capable of horrible brutality and dishonesty. Delano's difficulty to believe in such catastrophic scenarios as pirates or a slave revolt highlights the relative infrequency of such events, but also reveals Delano's tendency to discard information that might challenge his vision of the world as a fair, peaceful place.

Delano ultimately tells himself that Cereno must simply be too unwell to know what he is doing, and that his strange questions might simply reflect the dreary state of his mind. Delano thus plans to take Cereno to his ship, where the Spanish captain would be able to rest and recover some strength. Although he is reassured by these thoughts, Delano still finds comfort in seeing his boat appear in the distance. At the sight of the boat, the black slaves become excited and Cereno walks toward Delano, telling him that it will be agreeable to receive more supplies.

Delano's compassion and desire to help others is evident in his attitude toward Cereno, since Delano ultimately feels more pity than anger for the Spanish captain. At the same time, Delano's body and mind signal to him something that his thoughts do not: that, despite his attempts to reassure himself, he is still disturbed by everything he has witnessed on the San Dominick *and hopes to return to normalcy among his own crew.*

As the boat approaches, Delano witnesses another scene of disorder on the *San Dominick*: two black slaves violently attack one of the sailors, to the loud protests of the oakum-pickers. When Delano points this out to Cereno, Cereno begins to cough uncontrollably and Babo suddenly appears to give him support. This leads Delano to compliment Babo once again on his helpful behavior. Interested in benefiting from such service himself, Delano asks Cereno if he might sell him his slave. He offers Cereno fifty doubloons but Babo softly whispers that his master would never leave him. Cereno suffers from a new coughing attack and mutters an unintelligible reply. His physical state does not improve, so Babo takes him below deck.

Delano's willingness to buy Babo explicitly reveals that, despite Delano's apparent geniality toward blacks, he is not inherently opposed to slavery and might actually enjoy being a slave-master himself. This highlights the moral contradictions at play in this character: although Delano believes himself to be morally irreproachable, kind, and fair, he does not realize that forcing others into slavery is cruel and morally offensive. Instead, he prefers to think of slavery as an ordinary form of service that black people provide white people with.

Delano wonders if he should chat with some sailors, but remembers one of Cereno's comments about their ill behavior and decides that he does not want to interact with unpleasant beings. However, he soon notices that some sailors are turning to him on purpose, as though searching for his glance. Delano's worries return and he leaves the poop, hoping to converse with some of the sailors. As he walks through a group of black slaves to do so, the oakum-pickers let out a cry and other slaves, like guards, accompany Delano through the crowd. Delano says a few cheerful words to the slaves and observes the white sailors attentively.

Through his refusal to chat with the sailors, Delano once again proves that he prefers to avoid potential discomfort instead of delving deep into it in order to discover the truth. The black slaves' reaction to his approach suggests that they have set up a security system meant to keep Delano from hearing the true version of what has happened on the San Dominick *through the sailors. However, Delano once again proves oblivious to the potential threat the black people's behavior might imply, because he does not take them seriously as full human beings with their own hidden motives.*

While searching for a sailor to talk with, Delano notices one whose hand has turned black from constantly handling tar. Concerned by the ghastly look he notices in that man, which could perhaps be attributed to criminal deeds, Delano finds someone else to chat with. Finally, Delano finds a sailor working on splicing a rope in a group with black slaves. When Delano talks to him, the man looks up with a bashful air and answers Delano's questions shyly. His replies confirm details of the ship's voyage that Cereno had previously given Delano. The man soon stops talking when black slaves join him, and Delano concludes that he cannot talk peacefully with sailors as long as black slaves are near. Delano does not understand why this sailor, whom he believes to be one of the men who had stared carefully at him earlier, proved so timid.

The fact that one of the sailor's hands has turned black with tar is symbolic. It suggests that the white men on board now have the status that the black slaves had: because of the slave revolt, the crew is now subject to the violent authority of the slaves. Delano's association of misery with criminality makes him incapable of recognizing despair for what it is. Delano does not realize that the black slaves are not a mere nuisance, but integral parts of what is happening on the San Dominick, *since their presence is meant to control what the sailors are able to communicate to Delano and to remind them that they could easily be killed for trying to tell the truth.*

After leaving the group, Delano runs into a slave mother lying down while her child is climbing over her, trying to reach her breast. The mother then lifts her child and kisses it. Delano finds this scene endearing, full of love. He concludes that "uncivilized" women have soft feelings but strong bodies. He admires their devotion, concluding that they seem capable of sacrificing themselves for their children.

Delano's attitude toward black people is driven by condescension and a feeling of superiority. He cannot conceive of slaves' intellectual and emotional life beyond what he considers to be primitive, unsophisticated instincts. This keeps him from understanding that even a seemingly passive, innocent mother wants her child to be free and would thus support a slave rebellion.

Delano then looks for his boat, notices it is still far away, and decides to walk around the ship. In a gallery, he admires the elegant decorations, typical of the Spanish empire, and leans against the balustrade of a balcony. He imagines himself captive in an exotic castle, looking out at empty roads. Suddenly, he notices a Spanish sailor walk and point to him before disappearing below deck. Delano wonders if the man was trying to communicate a secret to him.

The elegance of the ship highlights the wealth and prestige of the Spanish Empire—a world power whose survival and growth depends on violently subjugating colonies and exploiting their resources. The external richness of such an empire contrasts with its brutal methods, such as the trading of innocent slaves.

Delano searches for his boat again and is frustrated to see that it is currently hidden by a rock. Leaning over, he almost falls but catches a rope in time, realizing that otherwise he would have fallen into the water. Delano then reflects on the fact that Cereno has disappeared and wonders if he is plotting something. He also wonders about Cereno's praise of the black slaves on board. He believes that Cereno might have intentionally disparaged his white sailors because he knew they might reveal something of his plotting.

Although it has nothing to do with the slave rebellion, Delano's near-accident highlights how easily death can arise. It suggests that Delano is not necessarily safe from danger and that seemingly innocuous acts can prove more threatening than expected. Once again, Delano's suspicions are off-target, since he believes that Cereno, not Babo, is trying to deceive him.

Delano then reflects that whites are "the shrewder race." He wonders if Cereno might secretly be allied with the black slaves, but concludes that this idea makes no sense because black people are not intelligent enough. Delano then notices an old, wrinkled Spanish sailor working on a **knot**. Delano realizes that the knot is in fact a combination of various kinds of nautical knots. Confused, he asks the man what he is making but the sailor simply replies: "The knot." Delano presses him, asking him what its utility might be, and the man replies that he is making it "for some one else to undo." Then, the man suddenly throws Delano the knot, telling him in English to cut it as fast as he can.

Although Delano's racism was evident in some of his previous thoughts, here his refusal to acknowledge black people's intelligence is direct and explicit. It is this thought that keeps him from conceiving that black slaves could revolt, which keeps him from ever approaching the truth. The knot serves as a symbolic illustration of the tangled situation on board that Delano could potentially solve if he understood its complexity. The sailor's gesture is a hidden plea for help that Delano, focused on appearing cheerful and talkative, does not understand.

Delano is too confused to know what to do. Atufal is now standing near Delano. The old sailor returns to his previous task and soon disappears to another section of the ship. An old slave then approaches, telling Delano in Spanish that the sailor is a bit slow-minded but innocuous. He retrieves the **knot** from Delano and throws it overboard, after muttering something to himself.

The slave's gesture of throwing out the knot highlights his fear that, through the sailor's cryptic messages, Delano might understand what is going on. It also serves a symbolic purpose, revealing that the slaves have sought to eliminate the knots that have tied them to their masters for so long by metaphorically throwing the knot overboard—that is, by upending the entire system and launching a revolt.

Although Delano finds the whole situation unnerving, he decides to ignore it, preferring not to be disturbed by such mysteries. He looks out and is glad to notice that his boat is now visible once more. Delano associates this boat with the feeling of home, because he always leaves it near his house. Feeling comforted, he laughs at his old suspicions, concluding that he could never be killed on this ship because "his conscience is clean."

As usual, Delano's thoughts aim not to pry into the problems around him, but simply to reassure himself so that he might feel peaceful and at ease. His belief that he will be spared violence because he feels morally pure is naïve and ignorant, since it denies the possibility of injustice, implicitly arguing that the only people who suffer are those who deserve it.

Babo then arrives, telling Delano that Cereno invites him below deck. Happy about this unexpected turn of events, which confirms that Cereno is well intentioned and not nearly as dangerous or disrespectful as Delano has feared, Delano concludes that these periods of calm on the sea must confuse the mind, causing one to experience more fear and confusion than in other times. Looking around him, Delano realizes that it must be around noon, but that the fog and the cloudy sky make it seem much later.

Once again, Delano confuses politeness for sincerity. Cereno's invitation does not necessarily imply that he is deprived of evil intentions, but Delano chooses to understand good manners as a reflection of honesty. This blindly optimistic attitude contrasts with Delano's surrounding environment, in which fog and clouds create an ominous atmosphere, suggesting that reality might not be as transparent as it seems.

Walking toward Cereno's lodgings, Delano is annoyed to realize that the calm seas will make it difficult for his boat to arrive as fast as it could otherwise. This frustration leads his previous negative emotions to return. Although he cannot fully eliminate these feelings, he forces himself to see things in a positive light. He tells himself that there are indeed abnormal things happening on this ship, which has an odd history, but that there is nothing more to it. Delano tells himself that Cereno is simply a temperamental captain, typical of Spaniards, and that most Spaniards are not inherently evil. Suddenly, Delano's boat comes near, which makes Delano happy.

Delano's tendency to ignore past events and focus on an optimistic outlook of the future eliminates the possibility of true reflection. Delano's attribution of bizarre events to cultural identity, such as Cereno's Spanish background, shows a willingness to understand that other people might have different customs from his own. At the same time, it also functions as a broad (and misled) generalization about people's personality based on superficial characteristics such as their nationality.

Cereno then appears and Delano asks him if he can organize the sharing of provisions, so that no one might take too many or otherwise be inefficient. Cereno reacts with apparent annoyance, and Delano concludes that he must not appreciate people taking over his role. When the boxes are lifted and some black slaves accidentally push Delano, Delano suddenly asserts his authority by lifting his hand in a cheerful, yet threatening gesture. This causes all the black slaves to stand still for a few seconds, shocked. The hatchet-polishers suddenly rise, Cereno gives out a cry and Delano immediately thinks that he is going to be killed. However, he calms down and, with gentle movements, makes both the sailors and slaves stand back. The hatchet-polishers sit down again and Delano notices that Cereno has fallen into the arms of his servant again. Delano is shocked to realize that he, too, panicked in the heat of the moment.

Although Delano has tried to convince himself that nothing threatening is happening on the San Dominick, *his body reacts in a way that runs contrary to Delano's self-reassurance: by showing fear and an understanding that there* is *something dangerous taking place here, capable of getting him killed. The scene also serves as a direct indication to Delano that he does not necessarily have the power or authority to control the slaves, and that the hierarchy of control might be more complex than he thought. Delano's gestures, which mix warmth and potential aggressiveness, are typical of Delano's attitude toward black slaves: outwardly convivial, yet secretly domineering.*

Finally, when the boxes are on deck, Delano begins to distribute water impartially to both the black slaves and white sailors. He saves extra water for Cereno but Cereno only drinks a little bit before returning it. Delano wants to serve special items, such as soft bread and cider, to the white sailors only, but Cereno insists on sharing it in the same way they did with the water. Impressed by this idea, Delano obeys him, although Babo insists on keeping one bottle of cider for his master alone. Delano tells his mates to stay in the boat, afraid that their presence on the *San Dominick* would only increase the disorder. He sends his boat back to the *Bachelor's Delight*, telling his chief officer that he will pilot the *San Dominick* back, even if it takes him part of the night to do so.

Delano's sharing of provisions proves only partially egalitarian, since he does ultimately favor the white sailors over the black slaves. Cereno's reaction highlights a certain vision of equality, in which white and black people are treated in the same way, even if Cereno is only behaving out of coercion and fear of Babo. Delano's appreciation of this gesture is highly ironic, since he did not want to perform it himself. This suggests that Delano is only interested in equality as an expression of politeness and generosity, not as a right that all human beings should share, regardless of race.

Delano then laments that Cereno has no boats. Cereno says that they were lost in the storm and, when Delano asks him if this happened at Cape Horn, Cereno is startled. He does not remember mentioning Cape Horn and remains in shock for a few seconds. Babo then intervenes, reminding Cereno that it is his duty to announce shaving time. He adds that Delano could follow them below to keep on chatting. Delano finds this shaving custom strange, but attributes it to Babo's meticulousness and diligence.

Once again, Delano does not realize that Babo's interventions are meant to conceal Cereno's contradictions and fears, so that the slave rebellion might remain a secret. Instead, Delano prefers to trust in the stereotype that black slaves such as Babo are concerned not with their own free will, but with the efficient service they want to deliver to their masters.

When Delano sees Cereno's cabin, he finds find it small and packed, as it serves various functions, from dormitory to chapel. When Delano expresses his surprise about this, Cereno answers that circumstances have led him to accept such a state of affairs. Following Babo's gestures, Cereno gets ready to be shaved. Noticing Babo's diligence, Delano concludes that most black slaves are naturally talented and inclined to become servants, because they are both graceful and lighthearted. Delano surmises that God must have aligned black people's movements with gentle, peaceful music.

The fact that, despite supposedly being the leader of the San Dominick, *Cereno's living area resembles more a prison cell than a comfortable bedroom should alert Delano to the idea that Cereno might not have as much power as Delano thinks. His racist view about black people's gentleness and skill merely serves to justify the oppression of foreign peoples. This view is all the more ironic given the fact that Babo is only behaving pleasantly in order to better fool Delano.*

Delano adds that black people are naturally meant to become slaves because their minds are limited and they are more likely to become dependent on other human beings who are superior to them. Delano, who considers himself warmhearted, describes his enjoyment at seeing a free man of color take part in everyday tasks near his house in Massachusetts. Delano notes that he always treats black sailors in an affectionate, playful way. The narrator concludes that Delano behaves with black people not with a sense of charity, but with genuine cheer, in the same way others might behave with Newfoundland dogs. On the *San Dominick*, Delano has been too nervous to fully express these sympathies, but in Cereno's cabin he now feels comfortable enough to remember his appreciation of black people.

Delano does not realize that, instead of depicting him as a kind, just man, his racist views about black people's intelligence only highlights how ignorant and patronizing he is, since he is not capable of grasping that black people are just as fully human, complex, and independent as white people. Instead, the fact that Delano is used to seeing black people in a situation of inferiority has convinced him that they are inferior and are meant to serve white people. By showing that Delano sees black people as beings comparable to dogs, the narrator reveals that Delano's superficial kindness to black people is not a sign of moral value, but a way to disguise Delano's feelings of superiority.

As Babo prepares to shave Cereno, Delano is entertained by Babo's decision to set a small colored piece of cloth underneath Cereno's chin instead of an ordinary apron, which Delano believes must reflect black people's love of bright colors. Delano observes Babo's careful movements when shaving the master in what Delano considers to be a typically Spanish style. Cereno begins to shake as soon as he sees the razor blade. In the amused, detached way of an outside observer, Delano notes that it almost looks as though Cereno is a condemned prisoner about to be beheaded by Babo. Suddenly, Delano realizes that the material under Cereno's chin is nothing other than a **Spanish flag**. He jokes that they are lucky the King of Spain cannot see this and playfully concludes that the colors are vivid, at least.

Delano's belief that Babo has chosen the Spanish flag as an apron because of its bright colors highlights his absurd, racist preconceptions about black people. In fact, Babo's choice of the flag is undoubtedly deliberate. It serves a symbolic function, allowing Babo to remind Cereno that Babo is now in charge of the ship, not the Spanish sailors. It's also likely meant to desecrate the Spanish empire, which is responsible for enslaving Babo. Delano's assumption that black people are ignorant and stupid keeps him from understanding the threat implicit in Babo's actions.

Performing his duties as a barber, Babo reminds Cereno not to shake because it makes Babo more likely to cut him. Babo reminds Delano to resume their previous conversation about the storm, and Delano explains that he does find Cereno's description of two whole months of calm seas incredible. Cereno then appears startled and, whether he shuddered or whether Babo made a wrong movement, blood appears on Babo's razor, prompting him to gently scold his master, telling him that this is Babo's "first blood." At this sight, Cereno proves utterly terrified. Delano feels pity for Cereno, who is so weak that he cannot even stand such a small and ordinary amount of blood. When Babo is finally done, Delano observes the slave's contented air and concludes that it looks as though Cereno were a creature of Babo's creation, at least temporarily.

The shaving scene is full of underlying tension. Although Delano believes it to be an ordinary procedure, readers who are aware of Babo's actual role as ringleader of a slave revolt understand the threatening nature of his acts. It remains ambiguous whether Babo intentionally draws blood or whether this represents an honest mistake but, either way, this episode serves as a reminder to Cereno of the extreme brutality that Babo is capable of. In fact, Babo's innocent attitude throughout this scene is eerie and grotesque, since he is in fact responsible for so many murders since the slave rebellion took place.

Noticing that Cereno cannot be shaken out of his depressed stupor, Delano walks out of the room. Babo exits the cabin a moment later with a cut on his cheek. In a sorrowful voice, he tells Delano that Cereno has struck him with the razor in retribution for Babo's earlier mistake. Delano is shocked to hear this and concludes that slavery does indeed corrupt the hearts of men. When Cereno comes out, though, he leans on Babo as usual, and Delano concludes that their relationship is akin to a romantic relationship, full of love and fights.

Delano's shock at seeing the violence that Babo has supposedly been a victim of (when, in fact, it is likely that Babo has hit himself to make Delano believe that he is the victim) seemingly highlights Delano's moral qualities, since he is capable of feeling compassion for a black slave. However, the fact that Delano only shows pity at the visible signs of slavery-related violence and considers Cereno and Babo's relationship quasi romantic reveals how little he understands slavery to be cruel and demeaning, even in the absence of such explicit forms of violent punishment.

A young, biracial servant, Francesco, then announces lunch. Noticing the boy's beauty and agreeable voice, Delano asks Cereno if he is a good man. Delano gives a laconic positive answer, in a reluctant tone, and Cereno understands his words as a confirmation of his beliefs: that mixing some white blood with African blood improves the quality of it. Looking anxiously at Babo, Cereno adds that he has heard the same type of comments about Spanish and Native American blood.

Delano does not realize that Cereno's laconic responses do not actually reflect his inner thoughts, but indicate that Cereno is merely playing a part. Instead, Delano decides that Cereno's answer, however unenthusiastic, confirms his racist beliefs. This shows how easily Delano can be convinced that the views he holds are true. People, Melville suggests, are more likely to seek confirmation of their beliefs in the world than to be open to questioning them.

Delano and Cereno then enter the cabin and sit around the table. Delano notices that Babo has chosen to sit behind him, not behind Cereno, and assumes that this allows Babo to better anticipate his master's desires. During the lunch, Delano again interrogates Cereno about the ship's misadventures, and wonders why so many more whites than blacks died from scurvy and fever. After looking lost, Cereno says that the constitution of black people is stronger than that of whites, and that they were therefore more resistant to disease. Delano has never heard this before and finds it curious.

Once again, Delano assumes that all of Babo's behaviors are meant to serve Cereno efficiently, because Delano is incapable of imagining that Babo might have hidden motives of his own. Despite his identification of contradictions in Cereno's narrative, Delano is uniquely likely to trust in the Spanish captain's explanation because he will believe anything Cereno says about racial differences as long as they conform to his own beliefs.

During the lunch, Delano hopes to be left alone with Cereno so that they can discuss financial matters, but Cereno insists that Babo is not only his servant but his confidant—in addition to originally being captain of the slaves—and that he will stay by his side. Delano finds this annoying, but becomes excited when he notices that a breeze has returned, capable of directing the ship in the right decision. Seeing how weak and emotionless Cereno seems, Delano insists that he will take control of the situation.

Once again, Babo's interference in affairs that Delano believes should only concern the ship captain fails to arouse his suspicion, because Delano is neither willing nor capable of putting into doubt his assumptions about power and hierarchy on the San Dominick. *At the same time, Delano's chivalry comes to light once again, highlighting his desire to help the vulnerable people around him.*

Delano thus leaves the cabin and, upon exiting it, is shocked to run into the huge figure of Atufal, who is standing outside. Delano begins to give navigation orders to both the slaves and the sailors, which Babo, who has followed him, soon repeats. Delano is satisfied to note that Babo is fulfilling his initial role as captain of the slaves. Impressed by everyone's efficiency, Delano concludes that the slaves could become good sailors with adequate training. When everything seems in order, Delano hurries back to Cereno's cabin, hoping to talk to him alone. However, as soon as he arrives, he hears footsteps on the opposite side of the room, and is surprised and irritated to realize that Babo has taken an alternative route to return to Cereno. Delano suddenly associates Babo with Atufal in his mind and feels uneasy.

Delano's surprise at how well both sailors and slaves are following his orders suggests that he has largely underestimated their capacities. Similarly, his pleasure at seeing Babo in charge reveals that Babo is resourceful and good at playing two roles at once. However, Delano does not understand that Babo's presence is meant to reassure the slaves and remind the sailors that he—not white men such as Delano—is still in charge. Delano's association of Babo with Atufal once again confirms that his intuitive reactions of fear are correct, since they are capable of leading him to truths (such as the fact that Babo and Atufal might be allied and dangerous) that his rational mind does not want to imagine.

Delano then informs Cereno that Atufal is waiting outside the door. Cereno shows fear but explains that Atufal must indeed wait for Cereno to come out. In a playful way, Delano chides Cereno, telling him that he is a cruel slave-master. Cereno's sullen reaction convinces Delano that, this time, Cereno's conscience might be affected by Delano's words.

As usual, Delano considers himself morally superior to others. In this case, he believes that Cereno's harsh punishment makes him cruel. Delano, however, does not seem to consider that his own desires to own a slave make him just as domineering and cruel.

As the hours go by and Delano finally sees his ship nearby, he invites Cereno to come with him to the *Bachelor's Delight*, where the Spanish captain will be able to rest. Although Cereno initially shows joy at this suggestion, he tells Delano, with a bitter voice, that he cannot go. Delano does not understand his reticence and feels offended.

Delano's focus on good manners once again diverts his focus from the heart of the issue. It also fuels Delano's belief that he is morally superior to others, since he is being polite and generous but Cereno is proving highly ungrateful.

Still hurt by Cereno's moody behavior, Delano prepares to board his ship without insisting that Cereno join him. Leaving the cabin, Delano feels angst return inside of him. He still does not understand why Cereno's moment of joy was so brief and why the Spanish captain is not accompanying him to his ship. Delano compares Cereno to a Jew, whom he considers likely to share meals with people he plans to deceive.

Once again, Delano's entire worldview is shaped by his division of people into racial categories to which he attributes fixed characteristics. In this case, he proves anti-Semitic in his association of all Jewish people with treason—a tradition of anti-Semitic thought that considers Jews guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Walking from the dark corridor into the light, Delano feels revived and chides himself for doubting the powers of Providence. He concludes that, even if Cereno is incomprehensible, Delano himself must be proud of his good deeds, which bolster his moral conscience. With one foot in his boat, Delano suddenly hears his name called out. He is glad to see Cereno walk toward him, wishing him well, hoping that God may protect Delano better than him. Moved, Delano is inclined to stay but follows Babo's silent indication to leave.

Delano's trust in Providence does not necessarily guide him to perform morally virtuous deeds. Rather, in the same way that he so often uses his own thoughts to reassure himself in moments of stress, Delano uses the idea of Providence as comfort. It allows him to believe that the world is inherently just for all and that he, as a uniquely moral being, will be protected from harm. This highlights Delano's propensity towards arrogance and self-delusion.

Delano orders the boat to leave and, as soon as he does so, Cereno jumps into the boat, yelling incomprehensibly. Some Spanish sailors jump into the water to join their captain. Delano's reaction is anger. He believes that Cereno is pretending that he has been kidnapped and is encouraging his sailors and servants to assassinate Delano. Seemingly confirming Delano's predictions, the crew on the *San Dominick* reacts to Cereno's disappearance with wild anger. Babo, holding a dagger, jumps from the ship into the boat. Prepared, Delano succeeds in restraining him. However, Babo then extracts a second, hidden dagger, and tries to attack Cereno, who is crawling away.

After hours of suspicion and underlying tension, violence finally explodes on the San Dominick, *shattering Delano's illusions that the world is a peaceful place and that the mysteries he witnessed on board were never dangerous. Despite his tendency to ignore discomfort, Delano proves brave and authoritative when faced with physical danger. He does not hesitate to engage in hand-to-hand combat with Babo, despite not understanding the exact nature of what is happening.*

In that moment, Delano finally understands the whole series of mysterious events he has witnessed. While he subdues Babo, he finally realizes that Babo was not trying to kill him, Delano, but his master Cereno. Looking up to Cereno's ship, Delano grasps that the black slaves are angry and uncontrolled not because there is bad policing on the *San Dominick*, but because the slaves have taken part in a revolt that Delano calls "piratical." The black slaves are raising weapons, such as knives, and keeping the remaining white sailors from escaping.

Finally, now that Delano understands the truth, it becomes evident that his racial bias, his embrace of traditional hierarchy, and his desire to trust in innocence and peace have completely skewed his views of what was taking place on the San Dominick. *Delano's description of the revolt as piratical highlights that the slaves are behaving outside the confines of the law. However, Delano never considers that slavery, too, is inherently piratical, since it steals people in other countries and sells them as slaves.*

As the boat moves away from the *San Dominick*, Delano finally sees the human skeleton used as a figure-head, set above the ship's motto: *Follow your leader*. Cereno cries out that this is the body of his murdered friend Alexandro Aranda. When the boat reaches Delano's ship, Cereno refuses to move until Babo is fully tied up and sent below deck, which Delano takes care to do. Delano also orders the swimming sailors to be rescued.

The association of leadership (the figure-head) with death (Aranda's skeleton) has dark undertones. It suggests that following one's leader blindly, without examining the moral nature of one's actions (such as taking part in slavery), might lead to nothing more than violence, death, and destruction.

Delano proceeds to plan the capture of the *San Dominick*. Cereno says that a Spanish sailor put the ship's guns out of use at the beginning of the slave revolt but also adds that the black slaves are likely to kill all the remaining white sailors if anyone tries to board the ship—a warning that Delano disregards, believing that Cereno's mind is too unstable to be trustworthy.

Although Delano has already overcome his surprise at discovering that a slave revolt has taken place on the San Dominick, *he remains unable to grasp the extent to which violence and cruelty has reigned on board. His inability to conceive of evil keeps him from trusting Cereno's warning.*

Delano decides that the boats will be more effective than the ship to chase the *San Dominick*. When he is about to step into one, Cereno stops him, unwilling to let Delano put his life at risk again. Captain Delano ultimately decides to stay, for practical reasons, and sends his chief mate in his stead. When Delano's men approach the *San Dominick* and begin shooting at the ship with their muskets, the black slaves react aggressively yet prove unable to respond as effectively without guns. They cut off a white sailor's fingers and try to cut off Delano's boat's ropes with hatchets.

The violence that has been an underlying tension, and that Cereno will later recount in detail in his testimony, is here explicit and undisguised. Desperate to maintain their power, the slaves use violence in strategic ways (such as cutting the ropes) but also as a punitive, gratuitous measure against the white sailors. The inadequacy of the slaves in a battle with guns highlights their tragic situation, as it becomes apparent early on that they are unlikely to beat Delano's men.

Delano's men tell the Spanish sailors, who are hiding as high as they can, to cut off the ship's sails, which will make it easier for the boat to pursue the *San Dominick* in fast waters. In the meantime, various people are killed, including Atufal and two Spanish sailors who looked as though they were allied with the black slaves. Finally, the mates on the boats board the *San Dominick* after one of them cries out to "Follow your leader!" After harsh, hand-to-hand combat, about twenty black slaves are killed, whereas only some of Delano's men are wounded. The sailors ultimately succeed in bringing the *San Dominick* back into the harbor.

The sailor's call for the mates to follow their leader is a repetition of a sentence Babo had used earlier as a threat, warning the Spanish sailors that they will be killed (like their leader Aranda) if they rebel. In this case, the mate does not mean it as a threat. However, the end result of this action is likely to be the same as Babo's threat, since "following one's leader" here inevitably involves taking part in violence and risking one's life. As it becomes clear later, the two sailors who were killed early on were actually manipulated by the slaves to appear on their side, which the sailors knew would get them killed by Delano's men.

Over the next few days, the two ships sail together to Chile then Lima, Peru, their final destination, where the vice-regal courts launch a legal investigation against the *San Dominick* slaves. Cereno, whose health had improved while on the water but has deteriorated since reaching Lima, is welcomed into a **monastery**, where members of a religious institution take care of him. The narrator then transcribes part of the official Spanish documents used in the court case. The first one contains Cereno's testimony. Although his words were initially subject to doubt, because of his mental agitation, other sailors later confirmed his narrative. Otherwise, the court would have had to reject a narrative put forth by only one person.

In a legal setting, where slaves are given barely any rights, a slave revolt is not seen as morally justified, but is condemned as an illegal act. Although the system might appear fair—for example, by doubting the validity of a single person's testimony and requiring multiple witnesses—it is inherently skewed against the slaves, who are never given a voice to defend themselves. Cereno's retirement to a monastery is ironic since, at the beginning of the story, Delano compared the San Dominick *to one—when it was, in fact, the very opposite of peaceful and safe. This suggests that religious institutions are perhaps not as isolated from the rest of the political and social world as they are commonly believed to be, but perhaps participate in some of the world's problems.*

The official document, written by a notary, declares that the criminal case against the black slaves on the *San Dominick* began on September 24, 1799. Cereno, the first witness, declares that the *San Dominick* left Chile on May 20, 1798, with thirty-six crew members, various goods to trade, and 160 slaves belonging to Alexandro Aranda. Cereno lists some of the black slaves on the ship, including Francesco and Babo.

This is the first time in Benito Cereno *that a perspective not marked by Delano's opinions is able to come forth. Although hearing another angle of the story gives it greater complexity, it remains obvious that other crucial actors are excluded from this process of establishing the truth: Babo and the other slaves.*

Cereno explains that the slaves were not kept in chains because Aranda judged them to be docile. After a week of navigation, the slaves suddenly organized a rebellion, killing eighteen crew members, either with weapons (such as hatchets) or by tying them up and throwing them into the water alive. They kept a few tied sailors on board to handle the ship's navigation. Cereno talked to Babo, the ringleader, and Atufal, his assistant, asking them to put an end to violence and assuring them that he would obey their orders. However, the leaders of the rebellion threw more men overboard anyway. Babo asked Cereno to take the slaves back to Senegal. Although Cereno argued that this could not be done, because of the distance involved and the lack of provisions, Babo insisted, threatening to kill all the white sailors on board if their wish was not granted. They agreed to try to reach a coast to replenish their water supply—which Cereno hoped would allow them to come across a helpful Spanish ship.

It remains ambiguous whether Aranda, like Delano, mistakenly believed that black people were inherently docile and obliging, or whether his decision not to chain the slaves was an act of relative generosity. Either way, Aranda, like Delano, underestimated the amount of resentment and fury that slavery breeds, even when the slaves are not chained. The violent killings that took place on the ship are undoubtedly brutal and cruel, but they also highlight the desperation that drives the slaves' actions. In the absence of a system that establishes trust and legitimacy for both white and black people, black slaves have no guarantee *that their orders and their white slave-owners' words will be respected, since slaves are not considered full human beings with rights. Therefore, their only weapon to force their former masters into submission is violence.*

After many fruitless days, Babo threatened once more to kill the white men on board if Cereno tried to reach any human settlement on shore. Cereno agreed to go to the island of Santa Maria, which was uninhabited. In the meantime, after daily strategic discussions with Atufal, Babo announced that they would kill Alexandro Aranda as a safety measure, in order to remind the Spanish sailors not to rebel. Although Cereno begged him not to do so, since Aranda was his childhood friend, Babo ordered two Ashantee men to murder Aranda with hatchets. Babo stopped them from throwing the half-conscious body in the water, wanting to witness Aranda's death himself.

Although Babo's behavior is undoubtedly cruel, his orders to kill seem motivated by strategic necessity more than a simple desire for destruction. In this sense, his behavior replicates the domination that slave-masters exert over slaves, in which violence is often justified in pragmatic terms, as a means to punish slaves and to protect one's own interests. Babo proves just as willing to disregard human lives as many slave-owners do with regard to their slaves, thus reversing the racial dehumanization at play.

Four days later, after Babo threw some more sailors overboard and Cereno begged Babo daily to tell him where Aranda's body was, Babo finally showed Cereno a skeleton, set in the place of the ship's former figure-head, a statue of Christopher Columbus. Babo implied that the white bones reflected the dead man's whiteness, and Cereno, horrified, understood that this was the body of his friend Aranda. Babo then threatened Cereno, telling him that if he did not bring the slaves back to Senegal, Cereno would "follow [his] leader." He repeated such a speech to every remaining Spanish sailor on board.

Babo's injunction to follow one's leader is ironic and threatening. Instead of reflecting elevated values, such as faithfulness and shared principles, it merely means dying. This view of what it means to follow one's leader—blindly sacrificing one's life for no apparent reason—is deeply cynical. It suggests that, in a context such as slavery (and the slave rebellion that is an aspect of it), leadership can be nothing but brutal and senseless, intent on destroying the lives of other beings.

After a few days, Cereno offered to sign a contract in which he committed to taking them back to Senegal as long as they stopped killing the Spaniards. However, the next day, Babo ordered the destruction of the boats, in case the sailors tried to escape.

Babo's apparent lack of trust in Cereno's contract is both surprising and logical. In a legal setting, indeed, this contract has no value, since slaves are neither citizens nor full humans with ordinary rights.

The narrator then includes selected extracts from Cereno's narrative. In them, Cereno notes that the calm seas drove many men mad, causing the slaves to kill the last navigator on the ship except for Cereno. Finally, after seventy-three days' journey, the *San Dominick* reached Santa Maria, where they saw the *Bachelor's Delight*. Babo tried to reassure the panicked slaves, who had not expected to see another ship, and, after threatening Cereno with death if he did not obey his orders, devised a plan to dupe Captain Delano. He set six Ashantee men on the deck, who would distribute hatchets if needed. He also pretended to keep Atufal in chains, and put four older black men in charge of maintaining some order.

The underlying reason that Babo's plan to trick Delano works is a mix of Babo's strategic talent and *of Delano's credulous willingness to trust that racist stereotypes are real. All the uncomfortable situations that Delano experienced on ship can be explained by Babo's careful planning, which allowed his followers to be on alert at all times, ready to attack Delano if necessary. Delano's racist beliefs, which kept him from understanding that angry slaves could be a potential threat, did not allow him to observe events from a neutral perspective.*

Cereno notes that, throughout Captain Delano's visit, Babo stayed by his side, playing the part of a faithful slave when in fact Babo, who understands Spanish, meant to observe Cereno and to keep him from misbehaving. Babo planned to attack Delano's ship at night and thus become in charge of two ships.

Babo's desire for territorial expansion mimics the Spanish empire's tendency to invade foreign countries and take them as colonies. In this sense, Babo's behavior is strikingly similar to the system he has rejected by overthrowing it.

Throughout his testimony, Cereno emphasizes his gratitude for Delano's generosity. In his concluding remarks, he mentions that he does not believe the black slaves premeditated a rebellion, but that they all supported it once it took place. He mentions that Francesco was devoted to Babo and had suggested poisoning Delano, which Babo kept him from doing because he had other plans. Cereno is too horrified by what he heard the slaves mention about Aranda's corpse that he cannot describe how they cleaned the skeleton. He notes that Babo ordered an inscription to be placed beneath the figure-head and that, although Atufal and Babo were in charge, they never killed anyone themselves. He also notes that, throughout the rebellion, the black women sang melancholy songs, which, according to the slaves, made them particularly eager to take part in violent attacks.

Cereno's mention of Delano's generosity upholds the view that Delano has of his own self as a moral being, since it is indeed thanks to Delano's actions that the truth about the San Dominick *ultimately came to light. Cereno's horror at the thought of Aranda's skeleton suggests that the violence capable of cleaning it so thoroughly might involve the same process as cleaning an animal's bones for food, and therefore some form of cannibalism (although this is never confirmed). The fact that sad songs drove the slaves' actions is not surprising. It suggests that misery and despair are at the root of this revolt, not necessarily cruelty or greed—even if the slaves were undoubtedly cruel in the means through which they rebelled.*

Cereno notes that certain crew members tried to alert Captain Delano to what was happening, but that the sailors' fear and Delano's innocence, which kept him from imagining such levels of cruelty, rendered these efforts futile. One of the men who tried to alert Delano was in fact killed as retribution. When a sailor once expressed hope of being saved by Delano, a slave hit him on the head. Cereno insists that his narrative should serve as sufficient proof that his crew and he could have behaved no differently than they were forced to. He adds that one of the sailors was killed as he tried to warn the American sailors not to board, but was taken to support the slaves' rebellion and was thus mistakenly shot. Another man, who was killed in a similar way, carried a jewel that he hoped to bring to a shrine in Peru as thanks for having survived.

Cereno here solves some of the mysteries of the plot, such as the Spanish sailors who were killed early on and the shiny object Delano had seen a sailor carrying. He notes that Delano was correct in believing that sailors were trying to communicate with him, even if he never understood their true purpose. In fact, Delano's complete lack of awareness about the complexity of the events taking place on the San Dominick *probably played an important role in saving both Delano and Cereno's life, since it kept Babo from becoming suspicious and launching an attack. In this sense, although naïveté kept Delano far from the truth, it also ensured his survival.*

Finally, Cereno adds that some of the sailors killed some slaves after the *San Dominick* was recaptured but that, as soon as he discovered this, Captain Delano intervened to keep other men from doing the same. Cereno concludes his testimony by asserting that, at twenty-nine years old, he is now mentally and physically destroyed, and prefers to retire to a **monastery** rather than return to Spain.

In saving the slaves from being murdered, Delano asserts his authority as well as his moral uprightness, by insisting that good conduct and respect of the law should be applied to everyone, regardless of race. Although Delano is racist and ignorant, he does demonstrate that he values saving human lives.

The narrator notes that, if this testimony is a key to the mysteries at the heart of this narrative ("the lock," as the narrator calls it), then the *San Dominick* should now appear open and bare. The narrator then proceeds to describe an earlier event: Delano and Cereno's conversations during their trip to Lima. During this period, Cereno, whose health seems to have improved, says that it was excruciating for him to behave so rudely to Delano on the *San Dominick*. Cereno emphasizes that he had the courage to jump into Delano's boat not because he wanted to save his own life, but because he could not stand the idea that Delano would innocently return to the *Bachelor's Delight*, where he would later have been killed.

The narrator's ambiguous comment about a lock and a key does not actually say that all the mysteries on the San Dominick *have been explained—but, rather, encourages readers to reflect on what* has *been solved and what* has not *been given voice. Now that Cereno is finally able to express himself without having to obey Babo's orders, he proves just as committed to good manners and social codes as Delano, since he considers politeness an important quality. Similarly to Delano, Cereno proves committed to helping others whom he knows to be more vulnerable, thus highlighting his own moral principles.*

Delano then concludes that he owes Cereno his life, but Cereno, finally expressing his politeness and gratitude fully, replies that Delano was clearly protected by God throughout his time on the ship, since Delano intervened in the men's lives in authoritative ways that had gotten other Spanish sailors killed by Babo. Delano humbly adds that, although he was protected by Providence indeed, his compassion and cheerfulness played an important part in his survival, because they allowed him to ignore his suspicions and thus keep from entering into conflict with the black slaves.

By invoking Providence and God's protection, Delano and Cereno both emphasize that Delano was extremely lucky to have survived the ordeals on the San Dominick. *Although Delano is correct in noting that his natural optimism probably aided his survival, his focus on his own self, while understandable, keeps him from examining everything that has happened from a moral perspective. He focuses on mere survival over the search for truth.*

Cereno then reflects on Delano's experience. He notes that, although Delano spent many hours with Cereno, Delano ultimately suspected innocent Cereno—not Babo—to be a murderer. Cereno concludes that these are the effects of well-executed duplicity. He expresses his wish that, like Delano, everyone might one day become aware of what lies behind their illusions.

Less focused on mere survival than Delano, Cereno, who has been emotionally scarred by his experience, remains focused on the meaning of truth. Although he does not mention the way in which Delano's racist beliefs have blinded him to Babo's intelligence, he does suggest that everyone carries unconscious biases that might lead them to see innocent people as guilty and guilty people as innocent.

Surprised by Cereno's gloomy tone, Delano enjoins him to forget the past and focus on the future, instead of reflecting on the moral nature of his experience. However, Cereno replies that only non-human things are capable of forgetting the past. In reply, Delano invites Cereno to notice the pleasant wind against their body, which can make them feel fully alive and healed. Cereno, however, replies that these winds merely bring him toward his death. Increasingly disturbed by his companion's pessimistic attitude, Delano cries out that Cereno is saved and asks him what has disturbed him so much. Laconically, Cereno replies: "The negro." Both of them remain silent for the rest of the day.

As usual, Delano prefers to ignore discomfort—whether moral or emotional—in order to focus on the pleasures of life and retain an optimistic outlook. By contrast, Cereno is not as attached to his own life, since he is now emotionally destroyed and has spent so many days knowing that his life was in constant peril. He is more inclined to reflect on the roots of what has happened, and concludes that the cause of all the violence that has emerged is race relations—the presence of black people in the lives of people like Cereno and Delano through slavery, and the violent energies that slavery can generate.

Babo—whose success in leading the revolt, the narrator emphasizes, depended on his intelligence, not his physical stature, since Delano overcame him so easily in the boat—remained silent as soon as he understood that there was no more he could do. The narrator notes that Babo must have concluded that his inability to act led him to abandon speech. Throughout the rest of the journey and the trial in Lima, Cereno refused to look at him.

The narrator's comments are meant as a direct rebuttal of Delano's racist views, as they emphasize Babo's intelligence instead of typical stereotypes about black slaves. Babo's silence is deliberate. It reflects the fact that the legal system will never give him voice and that the only way he can free himself is through actions (namely, violence).

Months later, Babo was put to death. Although his body was burned, his head was displayed on a pole, for all the white passersby to see. His face was turned toward the church where Aranda's bones were deposed and, farther, toward the **monastery** where Cereno, three months later, died, thus "follow[ing] his leader."

Babo's death mirrors Aranda's and thus suggests that both executions, however legal or illegal, are equally brutal. It remains ambiguous whether Cereno's "leader" is Aranda or Babo, whose death he imitates or "follows." Either way, even in death, Babo seems to be staring at the men he has subdued (Aranda and Cereno), perhaps signaling that, as an indignant, rebellious slave, he remains their true judge and master—suggesting that, through such strong relationships of violent domination, the master's fate is physically and morally tied to his slaves.

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