Benito Cereno Essay, Research Paper

The Bachelor?s Ignorance

In Herman Melville?s ?Benito Cereno? ignorance appears to be an overwhelming theme. Although ?Benito Cereno? holds a powerful message about slavery, this is not the major idea of the story. Ignorance is the fire that fuels slavery. During the entire story every main character displays signs of idiocy. Unfortunately, the most important decision-maker in the story, Captain Amasa Delano, falls into this category. Melville?s story is told through a narrator. He purposely tries to let the reader slowly learn more about the truth than Delano. By doing this, it is easy for the reader to become frustrated with the Captain. Over the years the word bachelor has been associated with inexperience, cockiness, and ignorance. It is ironic that Captain Delano?s ship is called the Bachelor?s Delight. In fact, Delano spends the entire story in a puzzled state. From the beginning the captain has good intentions. Delano even admits his dim-wittedness by blaming his over-generous nature on his ignorance. Unfortunately, Delano?s faults seem to take advantage of him in every situation.

Due to the fact this story was written ten years before the Civil War, Melville makes bold statements in ?Benito Cereno.? Slavery was an emotional subject for every American at this time. Melville implants these thoughts and emotions into his main characters. Perhaps the captain?s biggest mistake is underestimating the slaves. Ironically, Delano trusts the slaves more than the Spanish sailors. Delano says to Cereno, the captain of the slave ship,?I should think Don Benito, that you would find it advantageous to keep all your blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task, and no matter what happens to the ship.? (Baym, 2382)

Delano shows his ignorance by believing that if the slaves have work to do they will not engage in mutiny. In his mind the fact that they are Negroes leaves them incapable of intelligent thought. Delano was in constant control of all activities on his ship. It was hard for him to believe that he could not command any situation. In fact, he was appalled at the condition of the San Dominick, the slave ship. Originating from Massachusetts, Delano was not familiar with the customs and formalities of slavery. He was happy on his ship and had no interest in anything that did not concern his secluded life. It is this that feeds his ignorance and inexperience with slavery.

Another characteristic of this the Captain is self-centeredness. Delano displays this attribute several times during the coarse of the story. In one instance Don Benito explains the turn of events that lead them to the present. He starts to tell Captain Delano about his partner that was struck with illness and died. Delano then interrupts him to tell about the loss of his brother while abroad. He has no idea about what Benito has really been through with his partner. His one-track mind would only allow him to understand situations that he had experienced. While looking over the San Dominick, Delano shows his egotistical side. The neglect of the ship repulses him from the beginning. He never takes into account the possible reasons why it has been neglected. Once again he only thinks of how he would never leave a ship unattended. Delano fails to recognize his self-

centeredness until the conclusion of ?Benito Cereno?. The reader can only hope that he was wise enough to learn his from his mistakes.

Much emphasis is placed on Delano?s good nature both by the narrator and Delano himself. The implication is that Captain Delano is a trusting good-hearted fellow who believes in his own ability to judge those around him. He also requires repeated incentives of evil before he will engage in personal alarms or consent to believe that a person is bad. The narrator does not say whether he thinks this is good, but leaves the question for the reader to decide.

?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 determine.? (Baym, 2372)

Delano?s offer of help to Benito is derived from his belief that whites are the better race. He believes only a white man could be noble enough to offer assistance. Due to his belief that whites are superior intellectually, Delano blames Don Benito for the problems aboard the ship. It is not until Cereno tells him the truth does he realize the slaves were the problem.

?Benito Cereno? is told in third-person narrative form. However, the narrator focuses his knowledge as though it was limited, more-or-less, to the thoughts and perceptions of Captain Delano. Therefore, the reader is restricted to only Captain Delano?s perceptions. Perhaps this is the cause for all of Delano?s faults. By using a dim-witted central male character, Melville enables the reader to examine the way Delano?s prejudices affect his judgement. Ironically, there is one good fortune that comes from his ignorance. If Delano was to figure out the truth, it is possible that he would have been killed by the slaves. From the beginning the story was plagued with a negative plot. Fortunately, in ?Benito Cereno? Melville brought light on the dark subject of slavery.