



Benito Cereno

Herman Melville

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"...[Captain Delano was] a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable... 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..."

Herman Melville's controversial 1855 novella retains its power to move the reader over a century and a half after its publication. The story - which ends with a haunting twist - centers on a slave rebellion aboard a Spanish merchant ship in 1799 and because of its ambiguity has been read by some as racist and pro-slavery and by others as anti-racist.

The tale follows a sea captain, Amasa Delano, and his crew on the Bachelor's Delight as it is approached by another, rather battered-looking ship, the San Dominick. Upon boarding the San Dominick, Delano is immediately greeted by white sailors and black slaves begging for supplies. An inquisitive Delano ponders the mysterious social atmosphere aboard the badly bruised ship and notes the figurehead which is mostly concealed by a tarpaulin revealing only the inscription "Follow your leader."

Delano soon encounters the ship's noticeably timid but polite Spanish captain, Don Benito Cereno. Delano believes Cereno's assertion that he and his crew have recently gone through a debilitating series of troubles, having been at sea now for an unsettlingly long time. Cereno tells of these tribulations, including horrendous weather patterns and the fate of the slaves' master, Alexandro Aranda, who Cereno claims took fever aboard the ship and died.

Gradually, however, Delano's suspicions increase, based on his noting Cereno's sudden waves of dizziness and anxiety, the crew's awkward movements and whisperings, and the unusual interaction of the ship's white and black residents...

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