

Prof. Harvey
American Romanticism

Melville's Benito Cereno

Background

--Melville was extremely cosmopolitan and, having lived with Polynesian cannibals and sailed in whale-ships (an extremely multi-cultural environment), was more or less free of the racism, even the paternalistic racism we see in Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.

--The story is based on a real revolt and the account of it; some descriptions/court deposition Melville takes over in big chunks.

--But he also made lots of changes: changed date to 1799, which links Babo's revolt with revolutionary moment in France and also links it with the slave revolt in St. Domingo (Haiti), which was at once appalling and heroic.

--U.S. in the mid-19th-century is mainly Protestant, and thus is very anti-Catholic and perceives Spain as an effete, decadent country, in imperial decline (during this time period there was a genre of sensational anti-Catholic novels, condemning "popish" conspiracies and exploiting a public, lurid fascination with, for instance, the soft-porn imagination of what happens in cloistered convents--all sorts of novels/stories were written in the period about innocent maidens with heaving bosoms being held captive in nunneries or monasteries).

--Poe's "Pit and the Pendulum" is about the (earlier) Spanish Inquisition: an example of the genre of the captivity narrative that included being held captive by Indians, blacks in bondage (Uncle Tom's Cabin), etc. Note how, initially, the ship is compared to a monastery with monks.

Style/Technique

--Melville's syntax is intentionally gnarled and retards progress through story.

--The perspective is tricky: we "see" events through the naïve Delano's eyes who is not entirely reliable (he is racist and paranoid of Spanish conspiracy), and yet Melville also does not give us an objective narrator entirely distinguished from Delano. The narrator sometimes seems to be poking fun at Delano and at other times also see thru his eyes.

--On second reading the meaning may change dramatically because you know Babo is in control; and you will perceive Delano being treated more ironically.

Delano

--He loves order ("Anglo-Saxon" Protestant energy/tidiness versus Spanish enervation) and in the end quite capably asserts his rule (note: Melville is fascinated by techniques of ruling/executive control—i.e., Ahab and, if you think about it, the bad managerial style of the narrator in "Bartleby").

--Does he mask a ruthless drive to order and desire for gain (the gold at the end) via a mask of geniality? He squashes Babo with the same hard, virile zeal that our military wishes to exert against Iraqi terrorists, all the while parading his "goodness"?

Babo: ??? (notice how Melville refuses to get into the mind of Babo—why?) Hint: does Babo, become, just like Bartleby, or Moby-Dick, a sublime mystery? Melville, perhaps, honors the dignity of down-and-out workers, non-human species, other races—all “others” that he does not pretend or have the arrogance to understand?

Especially Consider these Scenes

1. scene in which Babo is shaving Cereno.
2. scene in which Delano discovers the plot and squashes, like a super-hero, the snakish Babo.
3. Delano’s comment to Cereno (after the ship has been retaken) that the sky is blue.
4. ending image of Babo and Cereno.

Read the Quote Below from a famous Americanist Scholar and Choose or Defend One of the Interpretive Options that Follow:

F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941)

In Benito Cereno . . . the embodiment of good in the pale Spanish captain and of evil in the mutinied African crew, though pictorially and theatrically effective, was unfortunate in raising unanswered questions. Although the Negroes were savagely vindictive and drove a terror of blackness into Cereno's heart, the fact remains that they were slaves and that evil had thus originally been done to them. Melville's failure to reckon with this fact within the limits of his narrative makes its tragedy, for all its prolonged suspense, comparatively superficial.

1. BC is an almost allegorical story of good and evil; race is incidental to the story.
2. BC is a story of black cunning/violence/evil and white-Protestant goodness (the way many of Melville’s contemporaries would have read it!).
3. BC is a story that critiques above #2 or Delano’s initial perspective that blacks are docile.
4. BC implicitly endorses Babo’s perspective. But if so, is it a strong or weak technique, for Melville not to get into Babo’s mind?