Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno”: A Political Commentary on Manifest Destiny

Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” published in 1855, offers a profound look into the political consciousness of the 1850s. While most critics regard “Benito Cereno” as a political text mostly for its satirical perspective on America’s use of black slaves, Melville’s story also presents a profound insight into 1850s American self-image in relation to the rest of the world. Specifically, Melville’s construction of the characters of American Captain Amasa Delano and Spanish Don Benito Cereno, and the relationship between them, acts as a way to reflect and comment upon American society of the 1850s. Furthermore, Melville’s adaptation of the plot and characters of “Benito Cereno” from an actual event demonstrates his interest in current events and politics as motivation for his writing. Without an understanding of the historical events and attitudes of 1850s America, particularly the American belief in Manifest Destiny, readers may miss the chance to read Melville’s work as a political commentary on American society. As a result, it is important to understand the historical events and American attitudes surrounding the publication of “Benito Cereno” in order to understand Melville’s analysis of American society within his text. An examination of the American attitude of Manifest Destiny during the 1850s and the factual event that Melville based his story on allows for an understanding of Melville’s
"Benito Cereno" as a political commentary on the hypocrisy of America’s domestic and foreign policies.

The American belief in Manifest Destiny governed how Americans dealt with foreign and domestic affairs during the 19th century. "Manifest Destiny" became the popular term to describe the American belief that Americans were of an "elect nation, destined by Providence to govern the globe" (Emery 49) after the publication of John O’Sullivan’s article “The Great Nation of Futurity” in The United States Democratic Review in 1839. In his article, O’Sullivan describes the popular sentiments of the American people:

We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission—to the entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny and in nature’s eternal, inevitable decree of cause of effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth and moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen…. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity? (O’Sullivan 430)

The concept of America as the chosen nation to spread its ideal republic throughout the world and to liberate oppressed people was accompanied by an increase of American territory westward and the national revolutions of the European colonies in Latin America. To abolitionists such as Melville, this statement stands in stark contrast to the legality of slavery in the Southern half of the United States. The tension between the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the existence of slavery in America would eventually play a role in the destruction of the Union and the start of the Civil War, as “[t]he commitment of both major parties to Manifest Destiny only raised the question of slavery, the question that American nationalism was supposed to bury” (Rogin 103).

The Napoleonic Wars in Europe during the early part of the 19th century caused Spain to lose its hold on its colonies abroad. As a result, many Spanish colonies in Latin America attempted to gain independence and establish their own governments throughout the 19th century. America supported the struggles of the Latin American natives, as they believed “it is neither to be expected nor desired that the people [of Latin America], far from the reach of the oppressors of Spain, should submit to be governed by them” (“Cuba” 12). In addition, the idea of Manifest Destiny led most Americans to believe that it was America’s duty to help oppressed nations and extend their republican form of government, as they believed in “the philanthropic mission of their country to extend the same [commercial freedoms] throughout the hemisphere” (“Cuba” 15). Americans also believed in spreading their republican institutions westward. Shortly after O’Sullivan’s speech on Manifest Destiny, the United States annexed Texas and signed the Treaty of Guadalupe—Hidalgo, in which the United States gained 525,000 square miles from Mexico. The belief that the American form of government and way of life was “the loftiest developments of human wisdom” (“The Spanish-American Republics” 339) had a profound impact on how Americans were perceived by the rest of the world and governed the ways America interacted with other nations. From Melville’s perspective, however, America’s condemnation of European colonialism conflicted with its enthusiasm for westward expansion. Melville criticizes this hypocrisy through his characterization of Captain Amasa Delano as a self-righteous American and Delano’s description of Don Benito Cereno as a contemptible European. Furthermore, Melville revealed his criticism that these self-important attitudes made America vulnerable to failure by illustrating how Delano’s arrogant attitude leads to his inability to detect the actual situation aboard the ship and his near destruction at the hands of the slaves.

First published in Putnam’s Monthly Magazine in 1855, “Benito Cereno” reflects the conventional American attitudes of
Manifest Destiny and anti-Spanish colonialism. Melville’s characterization of American Captain Amasa Delano, along with Delano’s description of the Spaniard Don Benito, illustrates the concept of the self-important American critical of Europeans. For example, while Delano is depicted as “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature” (2406), Don Benito is described by Delano as “of unfriendly indifference” (2410) and “anything but dignified” (2419). In the article “Cuba,” published in Putnam’s Monthly Magazine in January of 1853, similar attitudes of American and Spanish dispositions are expressed. The author of “Cuba” describes Americans as “an enlightened, progressive race” (16), while the Spaniards are “the extreme reverse” (14). Furthermore, Delano repeatedly praises his “charity” (2410) and “benevolent interest” (2412) towards the passengers of the San Dominick, reflecting the American tendency to “feel a lively sympathy for the oppressed everywhere” (“Cuba” 3). The idea that Americans felt they were superior to other nationalities is illustrated in Delano’s claim, “How unlike we are made! What to me … would have been a solemn satisfaction, the bare suggestion, even, terrifies the Spaniard into this trance” (2417). In addition, Delano attributes his success of saving the San Dominick to “the ever-watchful Providence above” (2445), reflecting the belief that America was “under the guidance of a manifest and beneficent Providence” (para. 5), as stated in President Franklin Pierce’s inauguration speech in 1853. These historical events and documents reveal the motivation behind Melville’s characterization of Delano and Don Benito.

The paradox of the belief that Americans were “a great friend of humanity … very anxious to fight for the liberation of enslaved nations and colonies” (Rogin 73) and the use of millions of African slaves in southern America and America’s own westward imperialism was difficult for many Americans, including Melville, to accept. Melville, an abolitionist, used “Benito Cereno” to examine “the false claims and confidences of Manifest Destiny” (Emery 50). Melville comments on the failures of the belief in Manifest Destiny through Captain Delano’s extreme distrust of Don Benito, which causes him to miss the actual situation aboard the San Dominick. While Delano struggles with misgivings against Don Benito, as he “he began to feel a ghostly dread of Don Benito” (2422), and felt Don Benito and Babo had “the air of conspirators” (2421), his sympathy for the blacks never wavers, as he “took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (2435). More than anything, Delano’s suspicions of Don Benito are based on his prejudices against European colonizers as a result of the sentiments of American Manifest Destiny. At the time, American’s were suspicious of Spain’s colonial policies, describing them as “hoary with abuses, and blackened with corruption” (“The Spanish-American Republics” 339). Delano comments that “[b]ut as a nation—continued he in his reveries—these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it” (2431). Melville’s reference to Guy Fawkes signals how “fears of ‘the Spaniard’ hand tenanted the minds of Anglo-Saxons since the days of the Gunpowder plot” (Emery 52). Furthermore, Delano attributes the “sad disrepair” (2407) and the “noisy confusion” (2411) of the ship to the “debility … bodily and mental, of the Spanish captain” (2410) and the “sullen inefficiency of the whites” (2410). By blaming Don Benito for the disorder of the ship, “Delano takes a second expansionist tack” (Emery 52) and projects his prejudice of the “pandemonium, enervation, and tyranny” (Emery 53) of the Spanish government onto Don Benito.

Delano’s tendency to blame the Spaniard for his unease aboard the San Dominick causes him to overlook the inherent tensions aboard the ship. In this sense, Delano’s inability to perceive the actual problems of the San Dominick because of his preoccupation with his suspicions of Don Benito reflects the faults of Manifest Destiny, as America was “too busy glancing abroad to notice local friction” (Emery 50). Melville’s political commentary on American values and attitudes is established in the faults of Captain Delano himself. Captain Delano fails to understand the actual situation aboard the ship as a result of his focus on Don Benito, as he “began to regard the stranger’s conduct something in the light of an intentional affront” (2419). An understanding of Melville’s familiarization of the historical event and documents reveals
that he based Delano’s missed interpretation of the situation on the ship on what actually happened. According to statements made by Delano, Cereno, and Babo, “[u]p to and including the time of Delano’s departure from the Trial, Babo’s plan was brilliantly achieved, with Delano, on leaving, knowing little more than he did before boarding” (Stuckey and Leslie 265–66). In addition, the documents reveal that the “developments on the Trial remained so impenetrable to [Delano] that he thought Benito Cereno might be his enemy” (Stuckey and Leslie 266). The fact that Delano’s misunderstanding about the situation aboard the ship was factual gives credit to Melville’s use of the story to criticize the delusions created by Manifest Destiny, “for at the same time when national forces, in the fullness of a very genuine vigor, were achieving an external triumph, the very triumph itself was subjecting their nationalism to internal stresses which … would bring the nation to a supreme crisis” (Rogin 102).

Although the 1850s marked the golden age of American westward expansion, “The Spanish-American Republics” expresses the American disdain for Spanish colonialism, claiming Spanish colonialism is “impelled by ambition and avarice, sustained by the proudest monarch in the world, enjoying the full sunshine of royal favor, followed and cheered on by the enthusiasts of a proselyting faith, inflamed by the wildest dreams of conquest, and striking for the dominion of the world” (“The Spanish-American Republics” 338). While Spanish colonialism was “the pursuit of robbery and plunder” (“Cuba” 6), American expansionism, marked by the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Treaty of Guadalupe–Hidalgo of 1848, was a “noble enterprise” (“Cuba” 10), the result of the “irrepressible desire of states to become united to each other by the ‘New Law of Annexation’” (“Cuba” 10). In the same sense, Delano justifies his plan to take over the San Dominick from Don Benito’s rule, as he claims, “There was a difference between the idea of Don Benito’s darkly pre-ordaining Captain Delano’s fate, and Captain Delano’s lightly arranging Don Benito’s” (2424). Delano’s ability to delusion himself into believing that there is a difference between his plot to take the San Dominick and Don Benito’s supposed plan to pirate Delano’s ship reflects America’s tendency to justify its actions in the same way.

Melville establishes Delano’s justifications for his taking of the San Dominick in order to reveal and criticize the same type of hypocrisy practiced by the Americans in their justification of westward expansion, yet condemnation of European colonialism. It is important to note Melville’s familiarization with the character of the historical Captain Delano, which he discovered through reading Delano’s recordings of his life in Voyages, to understand how Melville structures his commentary on American values. Melville harbored an extreme dislike for Captain Delano as he represented the hypocrisy of American society. For example, although Delano condemns European exploitation of Latin American natives and resources, he also “sees New Guinea, Ceram, Goram, and other isle in their vicinity as places from which great treasures might be secured in exchange for the least costly items” (Stuckey and Leslie, 269). In addition, Captain Delano’s piratical motivations for helping Benito Cereno are revealed in his demands for “half of the ‘Trial’ and all on board her for taking the ship and bringing her safe into port…. This promise [he] made [on assurance] from the Spanish captain of the ‘Trial’” (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Melville uses the duplicity of Delano’s statements in his letters to the Spanish kings in his text to “depict Manifest Destiny as the rhetorical camouflage for a largely ‘piratical’ enterprise” (Emery 54). In more than one letter to the Spanish government, Delano claims, “the services rendered off the island St. Maria were from pure motives of humanity” (Stuckey and Leslie 275), while simultaneously “refus[ing] to accept … ‘three thousand dollars by way of gratification’ from Benito Cereno … instead demand[ing] a larger reward” (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Delano’s insistence on compensation reveals the contradiction between American statements of ideology and the desire to acquire more wealth and property.

Even Benito Cereno comments on American hypocrisy, as he claims, “no one takes more advantage of our alliance and friendship than the Anglo-Americans; they enter our ports frequently, finding protection and assistance which surpasses
the limits of hospitality … but it is not surprising that the most generous nation should produce a monster who, deluded by ambition, should choose to ignore the public well-being” (277). Melville’s creation of sympathy for Benito Cereno as a character reveals Melville’s similar attitude towards American policy. In Melville’s story, Delano’s justification for his plan to “with[draw] the command from [Benito Cereno]” and “send her to Conception, in charge of his second mate” (2424) as his desire to redeem the oppressed represents the “interventionism of mid-century Americans” (Emery 53). Furthermore, Melville’s presentation of the contradiction between Delano’s reasoning for his actions as benevolent and his underlying desire to expand his wealth “invalidates the distinction … between American expansionism and the ‘corrupt’ colonialism of European nations” (Emery 55). In addition, Delano’s underlying desire to take command of the ship rather than save the oppressed is revealed by his decision to chase the San Dominick after the Spaniards had escaped, claiming “But to kill or maim the negroes was not the object. To take them, with the ship, was the object” (2449). The fact that Delano plans on keeping the negroes, who would have been considered valuable cargo, showcases that Delano did not go after the ship to save the other Spaniards still aboard the San Dominick or to bring the negroes to justice. Furthermore, despite Don Benito’s urge to Delano to “not give chase” (2448), Delano continues to pursue the ship, as he even “ordered the cannons on the Perseverance to be run out of port holes and fired at the Trial” (Stuckey and Leslie 266). In addition, Melville’s description of Delano promising his crew monetary rewards for capturing the ship is based on the factual events, as Delano claimed in one of his letters, “I promised to my people one half of the Trial and all on board her for taking the ship and bringing her safe into port” (Stuckey and Leslie 275). Melville used his text as a way to showcase the greed of the American people and the ultimate failures of the American ideal of Manifest Destiny.

Melville’s exposure of the hypocrisy of Manifest Destiny also functions, finally, as a criticism of slavery in America. The contradiction Melville establishes between Delano’s proclamations of sympathy towards the negroes and his simultaneous treatment of them as slaves exposes Melville’s criticism on America’s condemnation of European use of slavery and its concurrent policy of legal slavery in the South. Melville again uses his characterization of Delano to represent these American views, as Delano’s attempt to liberate Atufal, claiming, “in view of his general docility, as well as in some natural respect for his spirit, remit him his penalty” (2418) is shortly followed by his claim, “I should like to have [Babo] here myself—what will you take for him?” (2424). Americans believed they were supposed to aid the oppressed, as revealed in President Franklin’s inauguration speech as he said, “our country has, in my judgment, thus far fulfilled its highest duty to suffering humanity. It has spoken and will continue to speak, not only by its words, but by its acts, the language of sympathy, encouragement, and hope to those who earnestly listen to tones which pronounce for the largest rational liberty” (Pierce para. 4). However, Melville recognized that the existence of slavery in America was not consistent with these claims of sympathy toward the oppressed. A reading of Melville’s text as a criticism of slavery is validated by the existence of similar hypocritical attitudes toward slavery in the factual Captain Delano. For example, Delano criticizes European enslavement of Latin American natives, as he claims “the natives manifested no hostility toward [the Europeans]… But the Europeans seized and carried them away as slaves, in a most treacherous way” (Stuckey and Leslie 268). However, according to his writings in Voyages, “Delano had occasion to sail with slaves without evincing the slightest concern” and Delano expressed his views that slaves “were commodities of exchange … and should be exploited as such” (Stuckey and Leslie, 269). Melville used the character of Captain Delano as representative of the American people, who often claimed to be the refuge for oppressed souls, yet engaged in one of
the most oppressive human rights abuses themselves.

A close look into the history behind Melville’s *Benito Cereno* allows us to understand the motivations behind the text and his construction of the characters and plot. Specifically, the hypocrisy of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny alongside America’s criticisms of European colonialism and use of oppression on America’s slaves was the focus of Melville’s commentary on American society. The fact that Melville based his story on an actual event and his characters on actual people makes his criticisms against the American policy of Manifest Destiny even more poignant. In this sense, an examination of historical documents to understand the political and social culture of America in the 1850s is imperative for an understanding of Melville’s construction of characters and plot as a way to criticize American contradictory policies.

Works Cited


