

Reading Questions on Melville's *Benito Cereno*
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1. The *Bachelor's Delight* encounters the *San Dominick*. Where does this encounter occur? What is the cargo on each ship? Under what flag does each ship sail? Any irony here?
2. Examine the principal names and their denotations, connotations, and etymologies. Why did Melville choose Benito, Cereno, Babo, Atufal, Amasa, Delano, Alexandro, Aranda? Why *San Dominick*? Why *Bachelor's Delight*?
3. As you are reading, what two or three key themes emerge?
4. How does Melville use color?
5. Captain Delano appears to be a man of imagination (see p. 6). Is he? Upon what evidence do you decide? In what ways is he limited? How do we know?
6. How does Delano describe the *San Dominick*?
7. What was the "principal relic of faded grandeur"?
8. What is wrapped around the bow of the ship? Why? What inscription is on the bow? Describe it.
9. Describe when and why Delano goes to the *San Dominick*. Be specific.
10. What misfortunes does Delano learn about? From whom? How reliable are the persons reporting?
11. Describe the oakum pickers and the six Negroes polishing hatchets.
12. What are Delano's first impressions of the commander, Benito Cereno? How does he describe the commander's Negro companion?
13. What provisions does Delano bring to the ship? Why?
14. How has suffering affected natural order aboard the *San Dominick*?
15. What behaviors lead Delano to regard the Negro's actions as "the steady good conduct of Babo"?
16. Describe Cereno's behaviors. What excuses does Delano offer for this behavior?
17. The Spaniard Cereno tells Delano what befell his ship. Where have they sailed? What happened? What interrupts his story? What happened to his officers? How does he report events involving the Negroes aboard?

18. Who owns the Negroes? How has he required his slaves be transported? Why? With what results?
19. How does Benito regard Babo? How does Delano respond to this relationship? What do you find especially telling or memorable about Babo's behaviors with Cereno?
20. How does Cereno dress—and why? (Note details on pp. 20-21.)
21. Delano notices Benito's "small, yellow hands." What does he conclude about them and Cereno?
22. What does Delano offer to do for Cereno and the *San Dominick*? How does Cereno respond? Why?
23. Following Don Benito up the ladder to the poop deck, Captain Delano feels an "apprehensive twitch." Why? How does he characterize the Negroes they passed?
24. What violent act do Don Benito and Captain Delano witness? How does Benito Cereno respond?
25. Captain Delano questions Don Benito's effectiveness as a commander. Describe their conversation on pp. 24-26. Cereno tells Delano of the loss of his friend Alexandro Aranda. What happened to him? (After finishing the book, return to Delano's comment mid-page 26.) What reaction does Delano attribute to superstition?
26. Who is Atufal? When an oakum picker rings the forecabin bell, Atufal walks up the stairs to the poop. Describe the scene on pp. 27-29. What was Atufal's earlier station in life? What was Babo's? Why do these details matter?
27. What is significant about the padlock and key? How does Delano interpret Cereno's reaction to his comment?
28. Because Cereno fails to behave like a proper host or aristocrat, Delano suspects he is an imposter or worse (perhaps a murderer). What is important about Cereno's name? What conclusion does Delano reach about Cereno's ancestry? Why? (See pp. 31-32.)
29. What information does Cereno ask of Delano about the *Bachelor's Delight*? Why?
30. Several contradictions occur in the scene on p. 35. Identify them. How does Delano describe Babo's smile?
31. Delano notices a young sailor on deck and glimpses a sparkle? What does he think that means?
32. What thoughts "tranquilliz[e]" the American?

33. Delano notices a group around the tar-pot. What details contrast with the norm?
34. What contradictory animal imagery (real and mythological) does Delano use for the old sailor?
35. What animal imagery does Delano use in describing the Negresses? Which of their behaviors deepen his “confidence and ease”? (See pp. 44-45.)
36. What does the Spanish sailor with a marlingspike in his hand seem to do? How does Delano react? Why?
37. At the bottom of p. 47 and top of p. 48, Delano thinks about the odd behaviors he has witnessed on board the *San Dominick*. What “facts” about the white and black races seem to conflict with what he has observed?
38. Delano observes a sailor making a huge knot. What is the Gordian knot? Why is it relevant here? How does the story so far reflect that myth?
39. Describe Delano’s childhood reverie upon seeing the approach of his boat. What does he deem “too nonsensical to think of”? Why is this “nonsensical”?
40. What four points does Delano reflect on (p. 52)? What does he think of Spaniards (p. 53)? Why?
41. Describe the shaving scene. Where does it occur? What ominous details does Melville include? How are Delano’s descriptions condescending and perhaps prejudicial and naïve? What cloth does Babo use during shaving? What is significant about the use of *Amasa*? Why does this scene remind Delano of a “juggling play”?
42. Whose cheek bleeds? What does Delano think about Babo’s and Cereno’s behaviors in this scene?
43. How does Melville address race on p. 68? On p. 70?
44. What is ironic about Delano’s whispering to Cereno?
45. Who is the “tall man and time-piece”? Why does Benito shrink at Delano’s analysis?
46. Delano invites Benito aboard *Bachelor’s Delight* for coffee. How does Cereno respond and why?
47. Delano alludes to Judas on p. 79: explain what he means.
48. As soon as Delano boards his own ship, what does Don Benito do? To what conclusion does Delano leap?

49. What “flash of revelation” comes to Delano on p. 83? As a result of what?
50. What is revealed underneath the canvas stretched across the bow?
51. What irony lies in the cry, “Follow your leader”?
52. Explain the allusion to Preston Pans on p. 88.
53. In specific, how does the court deposition of Benito Cereno differ from the original account as told through the narrator Delano? Why are these differences significant? What do they indicate about the reliability of narrators?
54. Why is the fate of Don Alexandro so horrific for the Spanish crew? What details cause us to speculate about cannibalism?
55. What details about the Negroes contradict Delano’s prejudices?
56. Who is killed by “friendly fire”?
57. What is the fate of Atufal? What fate befalls the slaves after the battle?
58. Why does Melville choose to withhold so much information till the deposition? To what end? Do you find Delano’s consistent ignorance credible? Why or why not?
59. How does Delano justify his cluelessness? How do Delano and Cereno exchange pleasantries? What is Melville’s point?
60. Although Delano asserts that “the past is passed,” what “shadow” does Cereno feel cast upon him?
61. On the last page, what information do we learn about Cereno’s attire and sword scabbard? Why are these details so significant that Cereno never talks about them?
62. Explain the comparison between Babo and Iago from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, particularly after they are caught.
63. Why does Babo hang? What happens to Benito Cereno?
64. Why did Melville choose this title for the story? Why not “Delano’s Adventure” or “Calms and Revolts” or “Rising at Sea”?