

The Heroic Slave and the Introduction to Benito Cereno

Outline

The Heroic Slave

Intro to the text, true events

Role of the white abolitionist in the text: A call to action

Double standards in the text and in society

Introduction to *Benito Cereno*

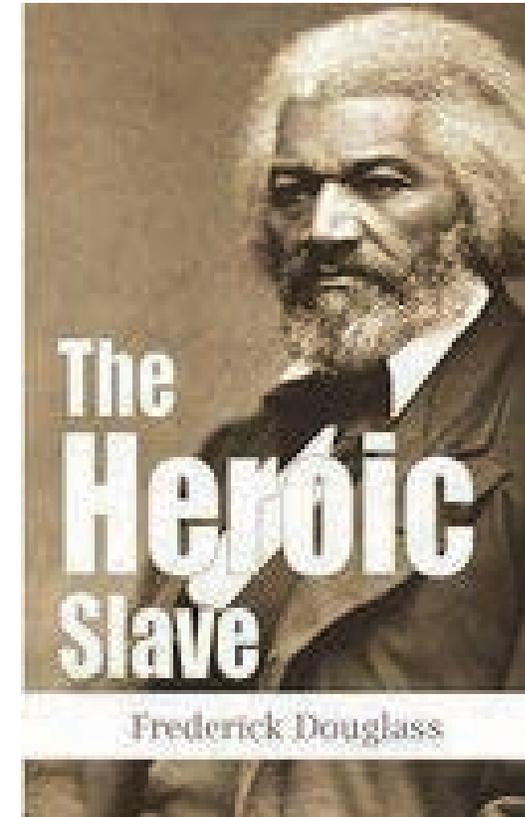
Background on Herman Melville

Contextualizing events and observations in varying conditions

Intro to the Text

The Heroic Slave is a short fictional piece written by abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass.

It was originally published in 1852 and inspired by an enslaved cook named Madison Washington.



The Heroic Slave: Based on a True Story

The Man: Madison Washington was a slave who successfully fled to Canada, then returned to Virginia for his wife and was recaptured.

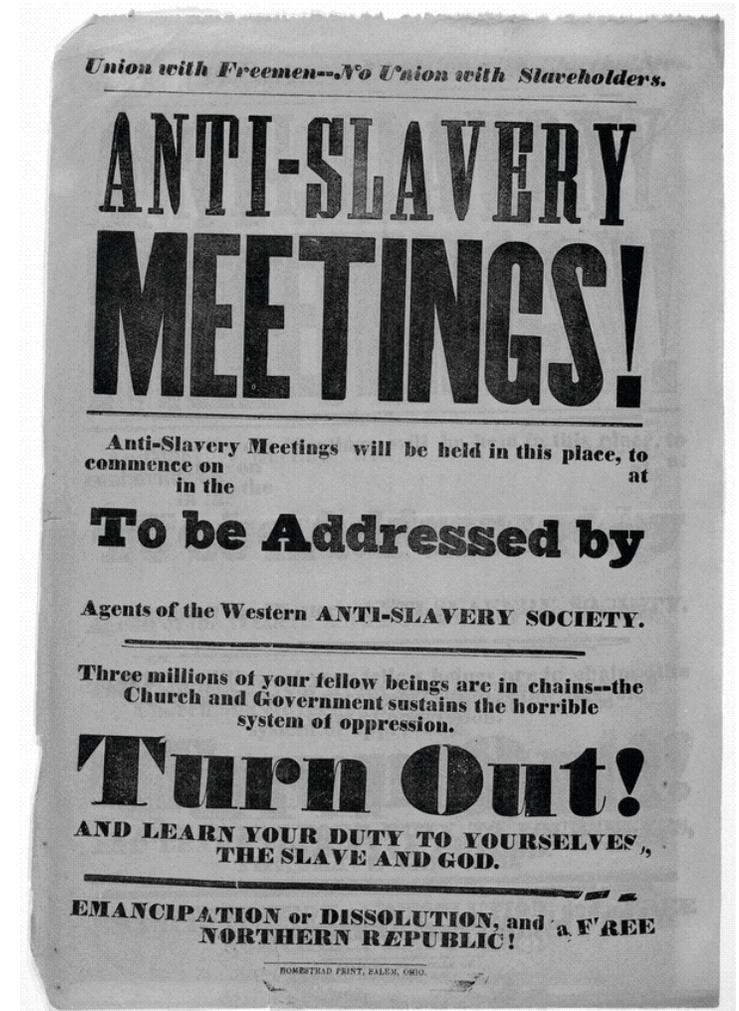
The Action: In November 1841, he led a rebellion on the *Creole*, a slave ship on the way to New Orleans, then directed it to Nassau, where slaves had been set free.

The Results: Washington and his conspirators were jailed and tried for mutiny, but eventually found not guilty. The other slaves on the ship were free under British colonial law.

The Heroic Slave

Mr. Listwell: A call to action

Douglas credits the first steps of the rebellion to Mr. Listwell, a white abolitionist.



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The Heroic Slave

“You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work...We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, *so were they*.” (pg. 234-235)

“I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, **had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action.** It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior.” (pg. 237-238)

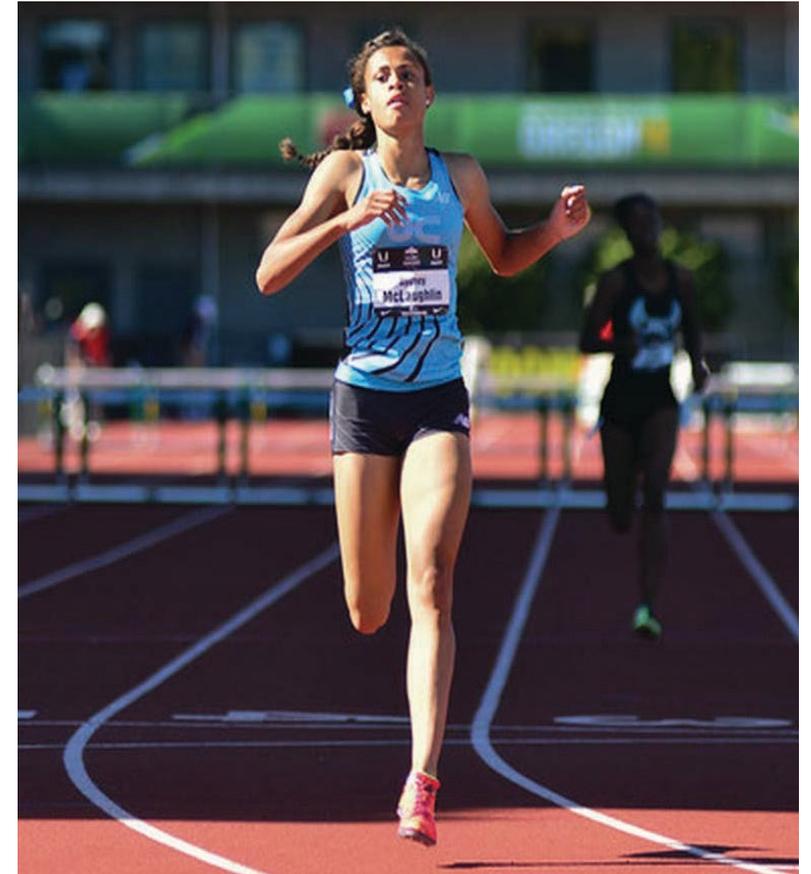
Double Standards



Policing the female
body

Objectification and
oversexualization

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Background on Herman Melville and *Benito Cereno*

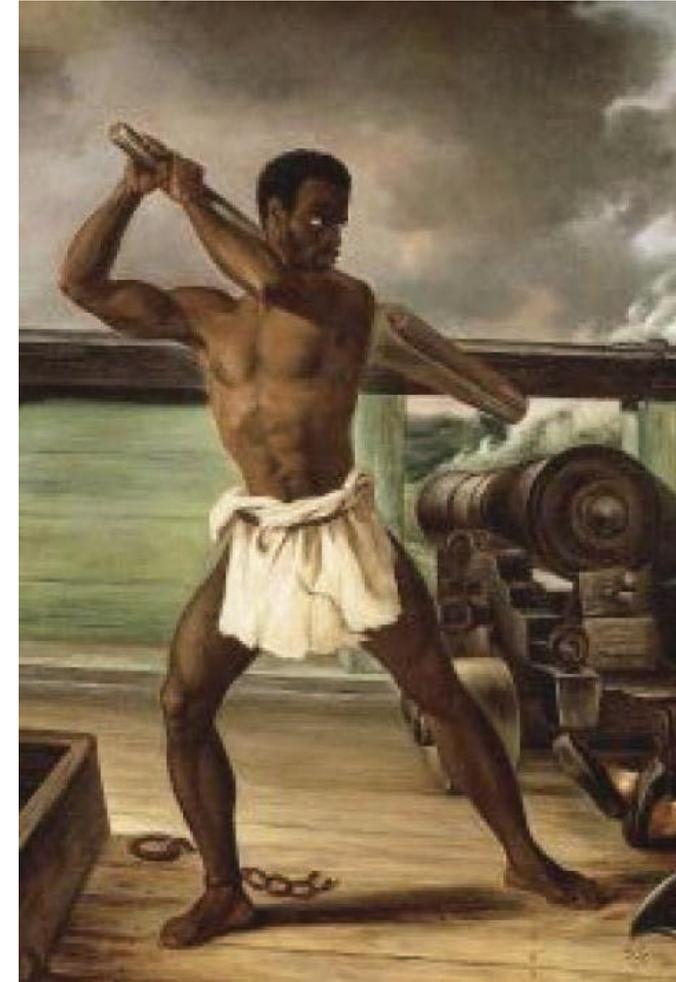
- Began his adult life on the sea, which had a large influence on his first writings
- 1855: *Benito Cereno* and *The Piazza Tales*
- Introduction by Prof. Kelley discusses slave narratives, literary tools, and audience



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Benito Cereno

Written in 1855 by Herman Melville
Tells the story of a slave revolt aboard a Spanish
ship from the perspective of an unknowing
American ship captain



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Contextualizing events and observations in varying conditions

Story of “The Piazza” as a metaphor for this theme (pg. 14)

“By placing *Benito Cereno* after ‘The Piazza’ and ‘Bartleby,’ Melville signals that his Spanish captain is simply another odd specimen of humanity, like the lonely sewing girl of forlorn scrivener, a piece of human jetsam picked up on the narrator’s travels.” (pg. 12)

Contrast between 19th century and 21st century interpretations of *Benito Cereno* (pgs. 11-12, 28)

Defining “Piazza”

Contextualizing events and observations in varying conditions



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Questions

1. In the text, Madison Washington was portrayed as a strong and intelligent man who took control of his destiny. However, to the sailors on the ship, he was seen as a “murderous villain,” despite the fact that his only motive was to obtain freedom from the establishment that repeatedly enslaved and killed other human beings. One sailor even mentions that he would have respected Washington if he had been white. How can we “stay woke” about double standards present in today’s society, and how should we address them?
1. In Prof. Kelley’s introduction to *Benito Cereno*, it is suggested that a “piazza tale” might be thought of as “a narrative that provides literary space for cultural conflict, makes its masked tensions visible, and allows them to play themselves out in a public arena...[that] may expose different races and classes to one another so that an outsider may wander freely among them.” During this time when opinions on societal issues are becoming increasingly polarized yet more easily isolated from one another (ex. filtering one’s Facebook feed or watching only Fox News), how can we avoid the danger of contextualizing current events in a narrow-minded manner and still encourage “piazza discussions” that may rely on sharing one’s own experiences?

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