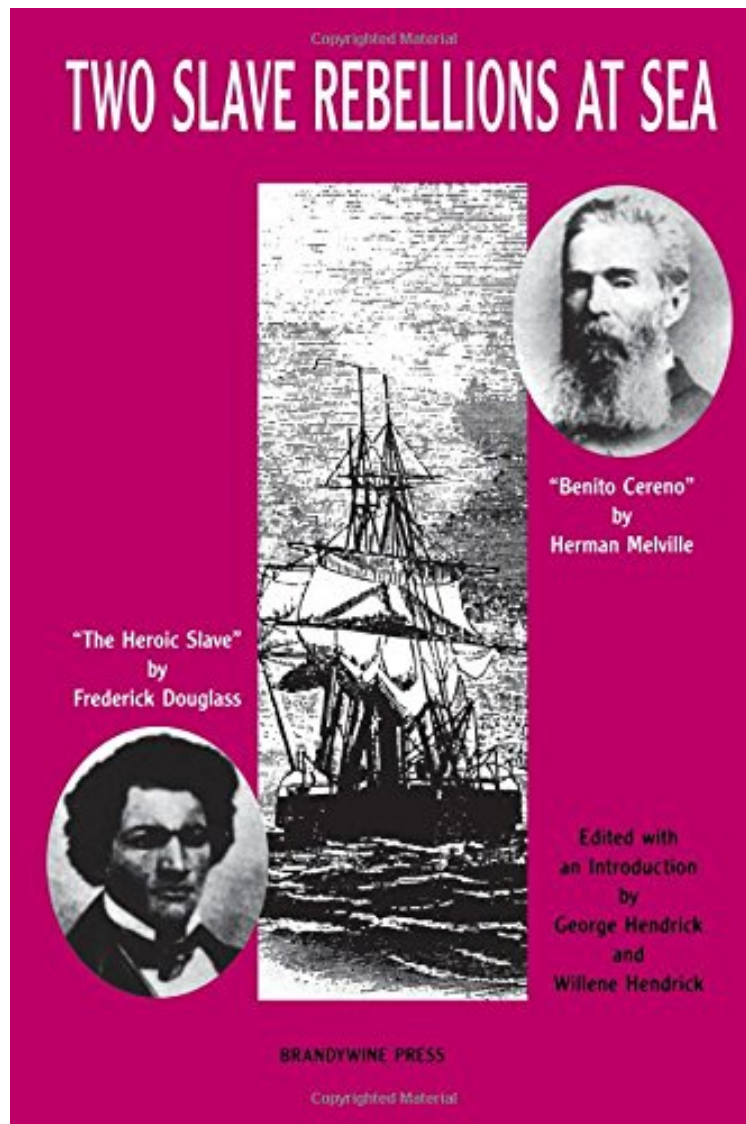


[Pdf free] Two Slave Rebellions at Sea: "The Heroic Slave" by Frederick Douglass and "Benito Cereno" by Herman Melville

## Two Slave Rebellions at Sea: "The Heroic Slave" by Frederick Douglass and "Benito Cereno" by Herman Melville

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Herman Melville:

Fredrick Douglass (1818-1895), a fugitive slave who became the best-known black abolitionist orator and autobiographer, and Herman Melville (1819-1891), a fiction writer recognized for the elusiveness of his meanings, both composed stories about slave revolts at sea. In the decade just before the Civil War, during years of increasingly angry debate about slavery, Douglass in "The Heroic Slave" (1853) and Melville in "Benito Cereno" (1855) fictionalized important slave insurrections. Of the mutiny on the Creole, on which Douglass's story is based, the editors recount what can be recovered about the slave Madison Washington, who led the revolt, and reconstruct the events before and after the uprising. The editors warn the readers that the official documents about the case are all biased against the mutineers, who were never allowed to tell their story to American officials. Addressing largely white readers in the North, Douglass, to the contrary, speaks clearly as an abolitionist: Slaves wanted their freedom and were justified in using violence to gain it. "Benito Cereno" is based on Captain Amasa Delano's chapter in his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels...* (1817) about a slave mutiny off the coast of South America. Writing in part for a northern readership, Melville tells of a mutiny that, unlike Madison Washington's, was suppressed. Delano's account shows no sympathy for the slaves. Melville's view is hidden in ambiguities. "Benito Cereno" is one of Melville's stories most often collected in anthologies; Douglas's "The Heroic Slave" is rarely reprinted.

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About the Author  
Born a slave in Maryland in about 1817, Frederick Douglass never became accommodated to being held in bondage. He secretly learned to read, although slaves were prohibited from doing so. He fought back against a cruel slave-breaker and finally escaped to New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1838 at about the age of 21. Despite the danger of being sent back to his owner if discovered, Douglass became an agent and eloquent orator for the Massachusetts Antislavery Society. He lectured extensively in both England and the United States. As an ex-slave, his words had tremendous impact on his listeners. In 1845 Douglass wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which increased his fame. Concerned that he might be sent back to slavery, he went to Europe. He spent two years in England and Ireland speaking to antislavery groups. Douglass returned to the United States a free man and settled in Rochester, New York, where he founded a weekly newspaper, *The North Star*, in 1847. In the newspaper he wrote articles supporting the antislavery cause and the cause of human rights. He once wrote, "The lesson which [the American people] must learn, or neglect to do so at their own peril, is that Equal Manhood means Equal Rights, and further, that the American people must stand for each and all for each without respect to color or race." During the Civil War, Douglass worked for the Underground Railroad, the secret route of escape for slaves. He also helped recruit African-Americans soldiers for the Union army. After the war, he continued to write and to speak out against injustice. In addition to advocating education for freed slaves, he served in several government posts, including United States representative to Haiti. In 1855, a longer version of his autobiography appeared, and in 1895, the year of Douglass's death, a completed version was published. A best-seller in its own time, it has since become available in numerous editions and languages.  
Melville was born into a seemingly secure, prosperous world, a descendant of prominent Dutch and English families long established in New York State. That security vanished when first, the family business failed, and then, two years later, in young Melville's thirteenth year, his father died. Without enough money to gain the formal education that professions required, Melville was thrown on his own resources and in 1841 sailed off on a whaling ship bound for the South Seas. His experiences at sea during the next four years were to form in part the basis of his best fiction. Melville's first two books, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), were partly romance and partly autobiographical travel books set in the South Seas. Both were popular successes, particularly *Typee*, which included a stay among cannibals and a romance with a South Sea maiden. During the next several years, Melville published three

more romances that drew upon his experiences at sea: *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850), both fairly realistic accounts of the sailor's life and depicting the loss of innocence of central characters; and *Mardi* (1849), which, like the other two books, began as a romance of adventure but turned into an allegorical critique of contemporary American civilization. *Moby Dick* (1851) also began as an adventure story, based on Melville's experiences aboard the whaling ship. However, in the writing of it inspired in part by conversations with his friend and neighbor Hawthorne and partly by his own irrepressible imagination and reading of Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists Melville turned the book into something so strange that, when it appeared in print, many of his readers and critics were dumbfounded, even outraged. Their misgivings were in no way resolved by the publication in 1852 of his next novel, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*. *Pierre*, a deeply personal, desperately pessimistic work that tells of the moral ruination of an innocent young man. By the mid-1850s, Melville's literary reputation was all but destroyed, and he was obliged to live the rest of his life taking whatever jobs he could find and borrowing money from relatives, who fortunately were always in a position to help him. He continued to write, however, and published some marvelous short fiction pieces *Benito Cereno* (1855) and *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"* (1853) are the best. He also published several volumes of poetry, the most important of which was *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), poems of occasionally great power that were written in response to the moral challenge of the Civil War. His posthumously published work, *Billy Budd* (1924), on which he worked up until the time of his death, is Melville's last significant literary work, a brilliant short novel that movingly describes a young sailor's imprisonment and death. Melville's reputation, however, rests most solidly on his great epic romance, *Moby Dick*. It is a difficult as well as a brilliant book, and many critics have offered interpretations of its complicated ambiguous symbolism. Darrel Abel briefly summed up *Moby Dick* as "the story of an attempt to search the unsearchable ways of God," although the book has historical, political, and moral implications as well.