

21L.00J/21L.010/21W.734J Study of an Allusion in Herman Melville's story "Benito Cereno"

"The old man looked like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon" (213).

Identify the Allusion

This sentence contains two allusions collapsed together into one. The first concerns the well-known tale of Alexander the Great, who was told that if he could untie the furiously complicated Gordian knot, he would become conqueror of all Egypt. Alexander famously cut the knot and moved on to claim his prize. The second tale is embedded in the reference to the "temple of Ammon" and refers to the fact that Alexander eventually became identified with one of Egypt's most important gods, Amun. This god was popular throughout Africa, becoming central to neighboring Nubian worship as well. The allusion speaks to an ancient world of imperial conquest, as well as the fluidity of religious identities as they moved and changed through cultural contact.

Identifying the allusion allows a reader to understand the passage, judge the aptness of the allusion, and look for connections between this allusion and other similar ones in the text.

Investigate the Context

This allusion appears when the Yankee sea captain, Delano, has come aboard a ship where slaves have mutinied, taken the ship's command from their white masters, and yet made everything look to Delano as if the whites were still in control. The puzzled Delano at this moment is himself a sort of Gordian knot, as he approaches a white sailor with "knot in head." But he also seems a figure of white power, like Alexander, who might potentially cut the puzzling knot of the appearances and deceptions before him, and save the white sailors. The leader of the mutinous slaves, however, Babo, keeps the "knot" of deception tied throughout Delano's stay so that he does not guess that he is being tricked. The image of the Gordian knot works to remind the reader of the tension generated by Babo's clever deception and control of the whites.

Looking more closely at the passage where the allusion appears opens up both allusion and text, showing the relationships between them. Authors often use these references to enrich their story and to create a richer and more subtle effect through such intertextual suggestions.

Relate to Larger Issues in the Text

Melville's use of the allusion to the Gordian knot may in a certain sense provide irony, since Delano fails to cut the knot and likewise fails to detect the plot against him. It provides irony in another sense as well, through its reference to Egypt and to the deep history of African empires. Babo, like Alexander, takes masterly command of the ship and plots the overthrow of the whites. Later, he is compared to a "Nubian sculptor," an image that reminds the reader not only of Babo's artistic genius and creativity but also of the history of great African kingdoms. Even one of the greatest, Egypt, became the

colony of Alexander of Macedonia and of Nubian kings. Most of these powerful kingdoms owned slaves and serve as a melancholy reminder of the deep history of slavery throughout time. Readers may well notice the references to Spanish and New World colonialism that Melville scatters through the story. With these, the references to African empire and slavery will remind the reader of a global history of slavery that far pre-dates the American plantation variety.

An allusion, when put together with others in the story, may reveal certain significant patterns of themes and images that resonate with the larger implications of the work.