

American Canonical Literature As Evident of a Moralizing Impulse in Dominant Historiography:  
The Lack of Resolution in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Benito Cereno* Challenge the Traditional  
Relationship Between Narrativity and History

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*Table of Contents*

1. Prologue	3
2. Part 1	5
3. Interlude	11
4. Part 2	14
5. Epilogue	20

## *Prologue*

Throughout the process of revising my essay on temporality and authorial intent in *The Scarlet Letter*, I had difficulty pinpointing the specific pieces of text that reflected my overarching ideas about this novel as whole. Writing and revising this essay in particular revealed to me that I often focus on macro ideas at the expense of details — a critique that I have received numerous times. The details that I neglect in my writing are self-evident, illustrating why the specific references in my thinking become lost in translation when transferring my intangible ideas into a tangible, written medium. Moreover, I find it easier to articulate my thought processes verbally and revising this essay enabled me to begin the process of correcting the disconnect between my thinking and writing. Moreover, when I returned to this essay, I felt very alienated from what I originally wrote. As a result, I opted to, largely if not completely, re-write sections of the essay, including the introduction and first two body paragraphs, because starting with a clean slate was much less intimidating than trying to work specific critiques into an existing body of text. My tendency to use abstract, generalized language was clearly shown in my original submission; in my revised work, I tried to more consistently incorporate specific, textually-grounded references so as to maintain a direct connection between my writing and *The Scarlet Letter* itself. Revising this essay not only demonstrated to me a prevalent pattern in my own writing, but also showcased the challenge of making an explicit argument about a work that is purposely multifaceted and ambiguous.

In regards to the temporal dynamics of the novel, Hawthorne complicates the traditional or commonly accepted division between the past and the present. As a reader, that disruption is difficult to identify at the onset of the novel and implications of these coexisting timelines are

challenging to trace as the work progresses. In order to consolidate this multiplicity, I chose to focus on the two prominent scaffold scenes because each represented the characters' relationship with time as reflective of Hawthorne's own cognizance of the simultaneity of various time periods. *The Scarlet Letter* was written at a moment in which the Puritan past was being subsumed into the origin story of the United States. Hawthorne's narrative is a reaction against the hegemonic ideology that characterized Puritanism, and the subsequent fusion of that strict moral code into the American cultural and political consciousness. By writing a narrative from the perspective of an ostracized woman, Hawthorne illuminates the consequences of such unyielding boundaries between virtue and corruption. Moreover, the metaphors and imagery that characterize *The Scarlet Letter* are multidimensional so as to show that effective and accurate historiography involves stories from multiple perspectives, including those of outcasts, respected community members, and marginalized groups such as racial minorities and women. Hawthorne occupies the boundary between history and fiction, real and imaginary so as to create the narrative of Hester Prynne that simultaneously illustrates the Puritan past and criticizes the culture under which she was demonized as threatening to the dominant social order. *The Scarlet Letter* is now a revered and highly studied piece of literature because it is considered a form of patriotism — criticism with the intent of encouraging reform.

*Part I*

Thresholds As Central to Historical and Contemporary Critiques in *The Scarlet Letter*

The scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* showcase the principal characters' confrontation with the divisions between their past and present – a severance that occurs due to Hester and the Minister's shift from chaste individuals to adulterers. At these moments on the scaffold, temporal and spatial barriers break down, along with moral boundaries, as the characters momentarily live in concurrent times and places. Hester's childhood, juxtaposed with Minister Dimmesdale's hidden past as the unnamed father of her child, are both present on the scaffold, enabling them to reckon with their disparate selves. Hawthorne similarly experiences his own past and present simultaneously – he describes “the figure of that first ancestor...present to my boyish imagination, as far back as I can remember” (9) as the platform from which his narrative ensues.

Furthermore, Hawthorne disintegrates temporal distinctions between his “stern and black-browed” (10) Puritan ancestors and the monotonous, “morally depraved” (14) denizens of the present-day Custom-House, which reflects his own authorial temporality. He complicates and blurs the boundary between his past and present in order to investigate how the Puritan past is regarded and interpreted in his contemporary world. As a communal space, the scaffold encapsulates the moments in which both the characters and author confront the two-dimensional categorization of their worlds and subsequently reject such ruling binaries, between the past and present, morality and immorality, honesty and deception, ostracism and approval.

The reader is first introduced to Hester Prynne as she stands upon the scaffold — a platform for public execution, as well as a quintessential location of Puritan society due to the culture's emphasis on punishment, Christianity, and moral rigidity. Moreover, the imagery of the

scaffold is invoked several times throughout the novel, and each time this location serves as the liminal space between the past and the present. For instance, "...the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy. Standing on that miserable eminence, she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home..." (64). The scaffold is the location at which Hester's understanding of her own temporality begins to unravel; Hawthorne imbues the scaffold with a temporal dynamic to showcase the disintegration of time as a linear phenomenon in the novel. At the precipice of her eternal ostracism from her community, Hester begins to relive her past; Hester's memory allows her present-self to embody and reimagine who she was prior to the sinful act she committed. Once she mounts the scaffold, Hester feels unmoored because the past she believes to have completely left behind comes to the forefront of her reality – she comes face to face with her childhood as an adult. Hester's past, present, and future all occupy the same space while on the scaffold reckoning with "the entire track along which she had been treading" (35), which signifies the inescapability of the past for it continually lives within an individual.

For Hester, the scaffold represents the magnitude of her punishment and the place in which she must reckon with her past, present, and future selves. The reappearance of the scaffold later in the novel — this time focusing on Minister Dimmesdale — represents both a temporal threshold and a boundary between sincerity and secrecy, or what the narrator refers to as the "illuminated circle" around the scaffold and the enveloping "gloomy night of sin" (88). Upon mounting the scaffold, the Minister positions himself at the boundary between past and the present because he equates where he is standing currently to where Hester once stood. Moreover, standing on the scaffold, "...with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life," (90) Minister Dimmesdale felt "a strange joy,

nevertheless” (90). The Minister had been “...rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, secret pain” (91); the overwhelming shame that accompanies the Minister’s secret exists in tandem with the relief associated with transparency as he stands on the scaffold – a place where his secret is fully exposed to his community. He has not yet relinquished his shame, yet standing on the scaffold represents a partial admission of guilt, as well as the threshold between “terrible anxiety” (88) and “lurid playfulness” (88), “intimacy and strictness” (91). At this “conjunction” (90), the Minister reckons with the different trajectories that his life may take moving forward, just as Hester was forced to do. *The Scarlet Letter* as a whole occupies the transitional space in which the past is not yet the past and the future has not yet become the future. Hawthorne elongates these moments of transition in the novel so as to call the reader’s attention to the multiplicity of historical narratives; Hester is a pariah and thus her story is fundamentally different from her Puritan counterparts, whereas Minister Dimmesdale is a respected member of the community and yet harbors a secret that threatens to unravel him. The multiple implications of the same location – the coexistence of the past and present, silence and speaking, misery and contentment, acceptance and ostracization. – layer as the novel progresses, which illustrates that there are multiple timelines and experiences occurring simultaneously and the scaffold is the point at which they all converge.

It is not only the characters who are experiencing the disintegration of linear distinctions; the author is also mapping his own present moment onto the Puritan past. *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850; writing in the context of hardly accomplished revolutions, Hawthorne was interested in how the Puritan past was understood by his contemporaries and in many ways, this novel resists the popular conception of Puritan society as the foundation of what would later become the United States. Hawthorne does not present Puritan history as directly or linearly

connected to his present time period. Rather, *The Scarlet Letter* breaks down the distinctions between the past and the present so as to establish a world in which boundaries are crossed – a literary choice that would only be possible from a future vantage point.

Hawthorne's creation of a narrative timeline that does not abide by the linear distinction between past and present is evidenced both in the various representations of the scaffold and in the use of anachronisms. In the novel's first portrayal of the scaffold, the narrator describes that "...this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent, in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France" (61). This is an anachronistic reference because the French Revolution occurred well after the decline of Puritan society in the United States, thus demonstrating that Hawthorne's narrative is not a historically accurate depiction of what life was like in Puritan society. Hawthorne's use of anachronisms further dissolves the boundary between the past and the present; once a character mounts the scaffold, they cross the threshold of linear time and space into a realm where time becomes anti-linear, various time periods and spaces merge and interweave with one another. Further complicating temporal distinctions, the author references his own present time while narrating the life of Hester Prynne in a present tense. The intricate, tangled relationship that the characters possess with their own temporality reflects Hawthorne's understanding of time as cyclical, with multiple timelines existing simultaneously. Hawthorne's use of the literary present while referencing his contemporary moment occurs primarily through the imagery of the scaffold, which signifies that this space represents the point at which time ceases to progress linearly for both the characters and the author.

The imagery of the threshold that is crucial to understanding the scaffold scenes reflects the multidimensionality of *The Scarlet Letter* as a whole. The way in which Hawthorne inserts himself into the narrative makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish between the narrator's voice and the voice of the writer. At the pivotal moment of historical transition in which *The Scarlet Letter* was written, Hawthorne's contemporaries were attempting to define their community because the foundations of their society were being uprooted. Americans in the 1850s widely regarded the Puritans as the founders of their nation; Hawthorne, contrastingly, wrote a narrative that challenged and complicated the common reverence of the Puritans. *The Scarlet Letter* portrays Puritan society from the perspective of a victim, whereas history is usually told from the viewpoint of the victors. By showcasing a woman that has been vilified by the Puritan hegemony, Hawthorne offers a critique of a culture defined by Christian moral rigidity and, subsequently, the American culture that has employed these same standards. This novel emphasizes and subsequently rejects the degree of severity in which the us versus them narrative was used in this pre-national community.

Furthermore, by creating a narrative that blurs the distinctions between the past and the present, Hawthorne effectively argues that history is subject to change and re-evaluation in the same way as the present. People look to history to legitimize their current understanding of the world and Hawthorne demonstrates how destructive and misleading that process is because the dominant conception of a particular historical period can not only be inaccurate, but also often excludes the history of marginalized peoples. *The Scarlet Letter* is a story told from the perspective of multiple thresholds, which fosters Hawthorne's criticism of binary ways of categorizing the self and one's world – namely the binaries between the past and the present, silence and speaking, righteousness and corruption, sincerity and secrecy.

*The Scarlet Letter* takes place in the transitory space between the past and the present due to the simultaneity of Hawthorne's own timeline and that of the Puritans. This convergence of time periods is achieved primarily via the imagery of the scaffold, which represents a threshold across the verge of time, among other boundaries – between good and evil, integrity and dishonesty, insider and outcast. By occupying thresholds, both the past and the present are now open to questioning and debate, enabling Hawthorne to insert his critique directly into the story that is unfolding. This novel rejects the unequivocal celebration of the Puritans that was common among Hawthorne's contemporaries by presenting an alternate version of Puritan society from the perspective of a pariah. Hawthorne's description of himself as a "citizen of somewhere else" (43) further accentuates his position as a writer that is exploring the past from the vantage point of the future. He complicates the one-dimensional view of the past that was widely accepted as irrefutable historical fact in the 1850s. While Hawthorne's narrative is not a viable substitute for the work actually written by marginalized peoples, *The Scarlet Letter* does provide the perspective of an ostracized woman and argues that her voice has claim to the writing of history.

*Interlude*

I have included my short reflection on the ending of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* because the inconclusive conclusion of this novel encapsulates a consistent aspect of American canonical literature during the late 1800s and early 1900s; a historical work that concludes without closure challenges the traditional representation of history as possessing the coherence of a narrative. Mark Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* showcases the limits and possibilities of progress, both in the realm of fiction and in the world of reality. Progress, in historical terms, often refers to an unequivocally positive movement forward; however, Twain juxtaposes scientific advancement with racial profiling and violence, which underscores that progress in a particular field or for a certain community does not equate to universal progress. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* features an inconclusive ending, further accentuating the persistent inaccuracy of both socially accepted and legally recognized constructions of racial identity in the United States during the 1830s. Furthermore, the advent of fingerprinting technology — the unbiased, scientific identification of an individual — continues to be colored by assumptions about race and racialized behaviors. Twain's novel brings the irrationality of race as a definite marker of identity to the forefront, thereby allowing readers to recognize this notion as insensible and correct their current behaviors that may contain resonances of this mode of thinking. A novel that portrays a not-so-distant past forces a confrontation with how the past remains prominent in the contemporary world and how individuals contribute to the perpetuation of ignorant or derogatory beliefs.

Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno* similarly highlights the contrast between factual and fictionalized notions of race. My essay focuses on the play of the barber as a microcosm of the text's repetition of metaphors and image patterns, as well as the racialized lens

from which Captain Delano experiences and makes sense of the world around him. In my original submission, I neglected to distinguish between the voice of the Melvillean narrator and Captain Delano's thoughts, which resulted in ambiguous references to the "narrator" without specifying who I was referring to. In this way, the novella's ambiguity is reflected in my original essay; the vagueness and uncertainty of the story itself led to similar qualities in my own writing. I have now clarified that distinction and subsequently suggest that the two voices of the narrator and Captain Delano both contribute to the novella's overall inconclusiveness. Moreover, the Melvillean narrator supplements the limited, racialized consciousness of Captain Delano so as to clue the reader in to what dynamics are truly being portrayed. By narrating this story from a dual perspective, Melville undercuts the authority of historical narratives. *Benito Cereno* showcases the difficulty of narrating the history of a slave revolt because such a story lacks written records. This novella simultaneously illustrates the limitations of portraying history through fiction and the importance of narrative as a tool through which stories that would otherwise remain hidden can now be told.

### *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Conclusion

The conclusion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* represents the novel's cyclical return to its own origins and, at the same time, provides the reader with an ending that closes without closure. From the onset, this novel brings the legal and social constructions of race into confrontation — a source of tension that fails to be resolved by the novel's conclusion. Following the exposure of Tom's true identity and the crime he committed, the town's collective consensus is "...that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him — it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life — that was quite another matter" (87). This assertion is framed as reasonable and rational, and yet the entire novel thus far has been calling into question the logic behind a binary understanding of racial identity as either black or white. In this way, the ending of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* demonstrates that the reveal of Tom's true identity was subsumed into preexisting beliefs; new fingerprinting technology did not signify an opportunity to challenge such belief systems. Furthermore, the quotation I highlighted showcases the persistence of racial dichotomies in how value and worth are determined. The objectification of black people characterizes the beginning of the novel and the inconclusive ending suggests that such conditions are ongoing. The conclusion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* furthers my appreciation of Twain's look into the American culture of the 1830s and the layering of his own knowledge and convictions about racial identities onto the past. Similar to other authors we have studied this quarter, Twain's work provides another way for his readers to understand and reckon with how their own history lives within the present.

*Part 2*

*Benito Cereno: The Role of Narrative in the Historiography of Slave Revolt*

The play of the barber in *Benito Cereno* establishes a relationship between performance and power that not only foreshadows the slave revolt that takes place later in the novella, but also builds upon and amplifies the racially stereotypical world view of Captain Delano. Race the fact comes into confrontation with race the fiction, as performed in the play of the barber. It is in this scene that all instances of the text “doubling [back] upon her own track” (47) coalesce. The shaving scene simultaneously reviews the ways in which Delano’s racial consciousness has prevented him from seeing the inverted power dynamics at play and previews the reader’s ability to see through, rather than in spite of, Delano’s perspective to the actual role reversal that is transpiring. Furthermore, Meville’s narrator tells this story through the mindset and outlook of Captain Delano; the layering of these two narrative voices enables the reader to recognize Delano’s perspective as inhibited – another dimension of “the greyness of everything” (67).

Upon the arrival of the San Dominick, Captain Delano expresses immediate suspicion of Don Benito due to the state of both physical and mental disarray of the captain and his ship. Benito Cereno’s lack of control over the people in his company — whom Delano understands to be his inferiors — is noteworthy, particularly in contrast to the assumed hierarchy of power between master and slave, captain and crew. Captain Delano remarks “I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little command but the name” (50); this early reference to Don Benito’s limited, if not entirely absent, authority implies that an inversion of power dynamics is at play here. Yet, it remains unclear whether or not Delano’s impression of the Spaniard is merely imaginative and, if the American captain’s discernment is correct, the reader is left to wonder

who actually yields power. Despite Delano's observation of Don Benito's unwillingness or inability to exercise command over his crew, Benito Cereno remains in power by title, in "name" — a contradiction that is brought to the forefront in the play of the barber.

As Captain Delano witnesses the shaving routine between Babo and Don Benito, the narrator states that "Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar...as he [Delano] saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block" (74). The choice to use racial terms to mark the contrast between Babo and Don Benito demonstrates that the American is understanding the scene before him using his pre-determined notions of what a relationship between master and slave entails. Thus, an inner conflict occurs between what Captain Delano believes should be taking place and the kind of dynamic that is truly being showcased. The shaving scene implies that perhaps Babo is responsible for Don Benito's uneasiness — the slave has become the master. Delano is unable to fully develop that thought into a definitive conclusion or accusation because he continues to operate under the racialized assumption that Babo cannot possibly be in a position of power due to his status as a slave. Despite — or perhaps because of, as well — the limitations of Captain Delano's ability to understand his observations, the reader recognizes that the play of the barber is in fact not a vagary at all because this scene is not unexpected or inexplicable; rather, the exchange between Babo and Don Benito parallels and intensifies the inverted hierarchy that was partially revealed in the beginning of the novella. The narrator colors the shaving scene as a dramatized display of racial stereotypes by revealing that Captain Delano's racist world view motivates his willingness to dismiss any initial skepticism of Benito Cereno and his desire to mentally re-establish the master and slave into the roles he assumes they occupy.

The behavior that Delano originally understands to be secretive is expanded on through references to plays, acting, and theatricality in the intimacy of the shaving scene. “To Captain Delano’s imagination, now again not wholly at rest...the idea flashed across him that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed...some juggling play before him” (76). Previously, Captain Delano only suspected Don Benito of concealing his true character; now, the Melvillean narrator proposes to the reader that both Babo and Benito Cereno are participating in the same masquerade. The initial suspicion of a disconnect between appearance and intention evolves into the idea that there is a performative quality to both Don Benito and Babo’s behavior. The way in which Delano’s skepticism evolves and expands pushes the reader to anticipate the eventual reveal of what has been concealed; Don Benito’s observable inability to maintain the persona he aims to portray foreshadows his eventual break in character. The novella’s establishment of parallel metaphors, namely the inversion of power dynamics through performative role reversals, via the restrictions of Delano’s consciousness, functions to propel the reader’s understanding of what stories – those of masters, slaves, and the relationship between those in either of these positions – are truly being told.

Furthermore, the American’s hesitant or unfulfilled mistrust of the Spaniard and the slaves in his company is consistently told through the lens of racially stereotypical language. Delano’s racialized, national consciousness is clear from the onset of the novella; yet, the extent to which race impacts his point of view becomes more concretely defined during the play of the barber. In the first interaction between those aboard the *San Dominick* and the crew of the *Bachelor’s Delight*, Don Benito compliments his servant Babo’s intellect and merit, to which Delano exclaims ““Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him”” (47). Not only is Benito Cereno’s admiring description of Babo uncharacteristic of typical relations between

master and slave, Captain Delano's response to this abnormality exemplifies his ignorance. Both Babo and Don Benito exaggerate their fidelity to one another, which the American understands to indicate their intimate friendship. Captain Delano's inability to recognize the role reversal that Babo and Don Benito are performing, in tandem with the narrator's illustration of Delano's racist world view, deepens the reader's suspicion as to the reliability of Delano's vantage point.

Moreover, the modern reader becomes especially skeptical of Captain Delano's consciousness as Melville's narrator describes "...a certain easy cheerfulness [in Africans], harmonious in every glance and gesture, as though God had set the whole Negro to some pleasant tune" (73). In the Melvillean narrator's recounting of the shaving scene, Delano's assumptions about Babo's benevolence are shown to extend to all black people; the American believes that passivity and the willingness to serve are simply traits of the entire African race. The racialized conception of the world that the American possesses plays in to the performance Don Benito and Babo are putting on; both master and slave are performing their respective roles in accordance with the dominant racial stereotypes of the era. The play of the barber showcases the contrast between the biology of race and the performance of racialized roles, largely through the narrator's supplementary point of view. The Melvillean narrator grants the reader another perspective through which to detect and see through the limitations of Captain Delano's ability to understand the events that have unfolded before him.

*Benito Cereno* brings factual and fictionalized notions of race in close proximity to one another so as to showcase that this dichotomy cannot be resolved within the confines of this narrative. Captain Delano both entertains and dismisses his suspicion of Don Benito throughout the novella; Delano's inner thoughts reveal to the reader that while his uncertainty regarding Don Benito's true motivations and character never fully dissipates, he remains unable to resolve the

contradictions he observes. The masquerade aboard the San Dominick is finally divulged as “...Captain Delano, now with scales dropped from his eyes, saw the Negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but, with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives in ferocious practical revolt” (88). The shock and surprise Captain Delano has when the curtain is pulled back is not shared by the reader due to the novella’s foregrounding of the narrator’s racialized consciousness. Thus, the reader is aware that Babo and Don Benito’s role reversal is fictional before that is revealed to Captain Delano. Yet, the question that was posed in the beginning of the novella as to who yields power is never resolved because racial stereotypes continue to color how this narrative of a slave revolt is presented.

The legal document with which the novella concludes entails Cereno’s deposition, which constitutes a narrative within the narrative; this document is framed as a “partial translation” (92) of the events that took place aboard the San Dominick — the truth remains clouded even in a court of law. Don Benito Cereno’s testimony is said to be “...not undisturbed...by recent events,” (92) a double negative that indicates the subjectivity of memory and perspective that continues to color how this story is told by the formal narrator and the characters. Moreover, *Benito Cereno* itself is a kind of “partial translation” because Captain Delano’s narrative voice is unable to communicate what truly took place in his interactions with the Old World. However, Melville’s narrator employs the limited perspective of Captain Delano to assert that the story of a slave revolt cannot be effectively narrated. This novella “doubles back on its own tracks” (47) through the repetition of theatrical metaphors so as to show the connection between race as a fact and race as a fiction, without ever resolving this contradiction. The subservient and dominant roles that Babo and Don Benito performed are never reversed; the power hierarchy that was previously in place between master and slave, captain and crew cannot be restored. The novella

undermines the possibility of certainty, particularly in regards to historical fact – as evidenced in the racialized portrayal of power dynamics being carried over into the final legal proceeding.

While the true narrative remains concealed from both the characters and the reader, Captain Delano's fragmented narration benefits the reader's understanding of the limitations of attempting to tell a story from its margins. *Benito Cereno* suggests that history must be articulated through narrative because without fiction, historiography would be confined to certain discourses, namely those that only tell the stories corroborated by written, historical records. Ultimately, Captain Delano's use of racial stereotypes to interpret the world around him cannot be corrected within the scope of the narrative or by the reader. The novella's formal narrator functions to reveal and expand upon Captain Delano's racialized, and therefore limited, narrative consciousness. Melville's narrator, however, uses racially stereotypical and derogatory language as well, further emphasizing the challenges of narrating a slave revolt, a story that lacks concrete documentation. The contrast between the actuality of race as a form of categorization and the performance of race through its stereotypes informs the reader how susceptible the narrative voice is to bias and ignorance. It thus becomes the responsibility of the reader to recognize those limitations and, in turn, construct the shadow history that lacks proper narrators.

### *Epilogue*

Hayden Whites's piece "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" encapsulates the relationship between history and fiction and argues that "The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand...for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama" (24). In other words, closure in historical narratives is a moral undertaking; it is an effort to superimpose the author's own morality onto a story that does not possess such undertones or resonances objectively. Moreover, "The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events" (27) is fictitious and arises out of a desire to clearly categorize the past into the framework of the present. However, history should not be told with the intent to provide a justification for present motivations or circumstances. Historiography is always subject to change; this discipline is not composed of concrete or fixed principles and displaying history through narrative enables that argument to be made and explicated.

White poses the question "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" (27) and I would argue that both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Benito Cereno* attempt to resist the notion that historical narratives always possess a "moralizing impulse". These narratives are not objective and do not aim to represent the past as possessing the coherence of a story with a defined beginning, middle, and end. While it is true that a moral lesson can be extracted from both of these works, the task of the reader is to withstand the compulsion to locate a moral dimension of a text. History is characterized by multiplicity and rather than assigning moral labels to the characters in historical fiction, we must recognize their perspectives as integral to the widening and deepening of historiography. Perhaps the reason why Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*

has been absorbed into the U.S. canon of literature is because of the reception it received; people largely interpreted this work as an effort to challenge the widespread reverence of the Puritans as the foundation of the nation and, subsequently, encourage reform in the present. Contrastingly, the uncertainty of the events described in *Benito Cereno* effectively combatted efforts to pinpoint a clear moral lesson within this narrative. The distinctions between canonical and lesser known works of literature highlight that the kinds of historical narratives that are subsumed into the consciousness of a nation or culture must present an easily recognizable moral takeaway.

Hawthorne's complication of temporal and moral boundaries and Melville's assertion that history is always subject to bias prove that it is through fiction that the idea of history as a series of explicit, comprehensible sequences is made incoherent and illogical. Furthermore, these two works conclude by highlighting what aspects of the story remain unresolved. Representing history through a fictionalized medium that intentionally concludes without closure signifies that history, and the project of writing history, are not synonymous with the past.