

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York City. His adventures aboard a merchant ship and with whalers in the South Sea Islands led to his writing of popular sea romances: *Typee* (1846); *White Jacket* (1850); his major novel, *Moby-Dick* (1851); a collection of Civil War poems, *Battle Pieces* (1866); and short stories. His later years were spent as a customs inspector in New York City. Melville is seen as a moralist whose novels depict the struggle between good and evil and how shows rebels protesting against injustice and authority. Melville finished writing *Billy Budd* in 1891 four months before his death. *Billy Budd* was published posthumously in 1924.

Billy Budd is about a handsome young sailor Billy Budd, falsely accused of mutiny, who becomes a legend when he is hanged for killing his tormentor. It is set on the British battleship, HMS *Indomitable* (called *Bellipotent* in some editions), which sailed the Mediterranean during England's naval war against France following the French Revolution. Other locales include the merchant ship *The Rights of Man* and Gibraltar. The action covers several weeks in the summer of 1797. Two mutinies earlier that year made naval officials nervous and gave rise to the quick enforcement of wartime laws.

Key Characters

- **Billy Budd** is an excellent sailor (age 21). He is assigned to work on the *Indomitable*'s foretop. Nicknamed "welkin-eyed Billy" (due to his habit of looking toward the sky; *welkin* means "sky") and "Baby Budd." Billy is strong, extremely handsome, blond, blue eyes, rosy cheeks. He seems to have noble blood, but parents unknown. He is illiterate, pure-hearted, innocent about the evils of the world. Billy is cheerful, a good worker, a "peacemaker." Symbolically, his names suggests flowers—beautiful but fragile. Billy stutters when overcome by strong emotion. He seems to be a symbol of good in the world, a sort of Everyman (ordinary man).
- **John Claggart** is *Indomitable*'s officer in charge of discipline (age 35). He is nicknamed "Jimmy Legs." He is tall, thin, a neat dresser. Claggart has an intellectual face, clean-shaven, good-looking except for heavy chin. He has curly black hair, violet eyes, pale complexion. His background is unknown but slight accent suggests foreign birth with possible shady dealings. Claggart is extremely jealous of Billy's purity, innocence, and good looks.
- **Captain Vere** is *Indomitable*'s captain (age 40). His full name is Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere. His nickname "Starry Vere" was taken from a poem by Andrew Marvell. Vere is a bachelor with aristocratic background. He has gray eyes and an otherwise unremarkable appearance. He is honest, intelligent, loves to read, and is strict but concerned about the welfare of his men. He is sometimes a dreamer. His symbolic name means "man of truth" (Latin *veritas* means "truth"). Perhaps Vere is too serious, intellectual, and too rigid in enforcing military discipline.

- **The Dansker** is a veteran sailor on the *Indomitable* (exact age unspecified). He is of Danish origin and is nicknamed “Board-her-in-the-smoke” because of the battle where he received the cut on his face. He has beady eyes and a wrinkled face. He wise but cynical and a man of few words. Melville compares him to the magician Merlin (because of his wisdom) and to a Greek oracle (a person consulted for advice and predictions of the future).

Good vs. Evil. Billy represents pure goodness, “an angle of God,” but is not able to resist the forces of evil in Claggart. Claggart’s false accusation and Billy’s stutter (which Melville uses to show the input of Satan even in the makeup of the angelic Billy) eventually lead to Billy’s execution. Claggart’s evil outlives the master-at-arms in the newspaper report of his killing, yet the legend of Billy also lives on in a ballad (popular poem with simple story) and in the hearts of sailors. This suggests that good is still stronger than evil. Billy’s goodness is tied closely to his innocence. Before encountering Claggart, he has no knowledge of evil; he is a “child-man,” like a country bumpkin who has never seen the city and who remains uncorrupted by its temptations. This virtue is also a flaw; it blinds Billy to the threat represented by Claggart.

Nature. Nature is explored in two main aspects: (1) the natural world, which is sometimes beautiful (rosy dawn) and sometimes meaningless (“blank sea”) as opposed to the world of civilization and duty shown on board the *Indomitable*. Billy is portrayed as being close to Nature (“rustic beauty”), suffering from the rules and evils of civilization. (2) “Human nature,” which can be pure and innocent (Billy) but also evil (Claggart’s “Natural Depravity”). Both types of character are inborn to everyone, which suggests that Nature itself is neither completely good nor entirely evil.

“Mystery of Iniquity (Evil).” Claggart’s evil actions are motivated by his anger toward Billy; he is jealous of Bill’s beauty and purity. But Claggart’s death prevents the military court from discovering his motives, since no one knew about them (he had kept them private). The final source of wickedness in Claggart’s nature also remains unexplainable to the reader (Melville indicates that there are certain reasons why Claggart betrayed Bill, but that the reason why Claggart was so evil in the first place cannot be explained). This is an example of a basic problem of knowledge: the reader can never know the true nature of Claggart’s soul. The story tries to show the nature of good and evil, but because human emotions are complicated, there is no full explanation.

Duty vs. Morality. Billy’s unintentional killing of Claggart presents Vere and the drumhead court with a difficult decision: The moral principle prompts the judges to look at Billy’s motives, and they conclude he is “innocent before God.” But the officers are subjects of the king and therefore have a duty to obey his laws first, even if these laws appear harsh and arbitrary. Their duty to the Crown wins out as Billy is condemned to die.

Order vs. Disorder. Captain Vere recognizes the basic human need for order (“measured forms”), especially the need to maintain discipline when dealing with uneducated sailors in times of political upheaval. The execution of Billy is seen as a way of preserving order, but disorder threatens as sailors “murmur” when the sentence is announced, when Billy is hanged, and when

Billy's body is buried at sea. In each case, the commands of senior officers quickly restore order. But the spiritual, mystical quality of Billy's death challenges rational order just as the farewell to his first ship broke with proper naval behavior. Claggart's outwardly rational behavior betrays the complex nature of his emotions and the lack of a rational explanation for his evil deeds. The narrator comments on *order* ("symmetry of form") as a characteristic of art, but says that a faculty story such as his necessarily has "ragged edges."

Revolution and Reform. Historical revolutions, especially those such as the French Revolution and the mutinies of British sailors, bring about reform and overthrow oppressive authorities. But they also cause great turmoil, suffering, and injustice. It is ironic that Billy is called a "fighting peacemaker," since peace and fighting are opposites. The situation of war and the fear of further mutinies are responsible for Billy's execution; in wartime, moral principles must be overlooked and the deed itself must be punished. Science and modern inventions cause a similar revolution in knowledge and in the way wars are fought, but they also mean the loss of beauty and a changed understanding of heroism.

The Great Man. Lord Nelson, Captain Vere, and Billy are all extraordinary men. Nelson's leadership and profound feelings make him "the greatest sailor since our world began." Vere's greatness is tied to his honesty and faithful adherence to his duty. As a representative of the "Handsome Sailor," Billy possess beauty and goodness that make him heroic; like Nelson, he dies a glorious death. The comparison of the three men suggests that true greatness comes from nobility of character ("magnanimity") more than from brave deeds. It is worth noting that Claggart is "exceptional" in the negative sense and that Melville sets all four men apart, beyond the understanding of common people.

The basic main plot of *Billy Budd* is the confrontation of the three central characters of Billy, Claggart, and Vere. When Billy is forced into service on the *Indomitable*, this triggers a chain of events that contrast the characters' moral natures—the arousal of Claggart's envy; the false accusation; the bringing together of the two men by Vere; Billy's killing of Claggart; Billy's sentencing and execution. Some digressions occur in *Billy Budd* that relate to other people and events (such as Lord Nelson and the French Revolution) and comments on moral issues (the discussion of "Natural Depravity"). The last three chapters give different responses to Billy's death: Billy as the center of Vere's last thoughts; the incorrect version of event as reported in the naval newspaper; the poetic version as preserved in the sailor's ballad.

The story is reported by a third-person with limited omniscience (the narrator does not have complete knowledge of the characters and events). The narrator can only guess what happened during Vere's interview with Billy and can only suggest the reasons for Claggart's wickedness.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare Billy Budd with other innocent characters in literature.
2. Discuss the sources of major allusions in the novel.
3. Explain possible reasons for Claggart's animosity toward Billy.

4. Determine the forces which lead to Billy's execution.
5. Explain why impressment is a key issue in the novel.
6. Describe and evaluate the tableau of the execution.
7. Explain why *Billy Budd* may be read as a tragedy, morality play, or fable.
8. Discuss Melville's use of names for people and ships.
9. Explain how the novel reveals Melville's own acquiescence to the mystery of life.
10. Explain the chain of command which ensnares Billy.
11. Discuss elements of Melville's fiction which demonstrate his insider's knowledge of ships and seagoing men.
12. Using *Billy Budd* as an example, define the following literary terms: point of view irony, paradox, dilemma, symbol, tragic flaw, and theme.
13. Explain how history serves as a backdrop for the story.
14. Analyze why Melville follows his three characters to their deaths.
15. Explain why Melville might be included in a study of great transcendentalists.
16. Compare Melville's grasp of evil with that of Hawthorne.
17. Analyze the imagery of "Billy in the Darbies."
18. Discuss possible symbolic interpretations for these events: The *Indomitable's* failure to overtake the enemy ship, Vere's death from a musket ball shot from a porthole, the chaplain's kissing Billy's cheek, the newspaper's allegation that Billy was not English, and the twining of seaweed around Billy's corpse.
19. Contrast Melville's other seafarers and journeymen with Billy Budd.
20. Explain why a posthumous work like *Billy Budd* requires special critical handling.
21. Explain why not a single critique of *Billy Budd* can exhaust all the possibilities of its complexity.
22. Analyze a selection of similes from the novel which compares human behavior to something in nature.
23. Explain the role of minor figures in the plot, particularly Squeak, Ratcliffe, Mr. Mordant, the chaplain, the surgeon, Graveling, and the old Dansker.

24. Discuss the texture of *Billy Budd* in terms of straightforward narrative interposed alongside digression and commentary.
25. Explain why Melville, nearing the end of his life, would spend his final days writing *Billy Budd*.