

## *Innocence When Dooms tht Idealist Man in Melville's Billy Budd*

Instructor : Luma Ibrahim Al-Barznji

College of Basic Educatio

Dayala University

### *Abstract*

Innocence sometimes reaches the points of naïveté as it stands against evil and depravity but at another time this innocence may lead to one's doom if it lacks wisdom . It finds its counterpart in the hatred and malice that some people are disguised with . The conflict here is also which law society has to apply ; man-made law or natural law for both laws put man in an inevitable way under , sometimes , unjust punishment.

In *Billy Budd* , men who confront the law and men who confront evil suffer similar consequences suggesting the dark view that evil and law are closely connected .

The story has clear references with the circumstances of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice , his innocent spirit , and his unjust execution though critics remain sharply divided over whether *Billy Budd's* religious imagery represents Melville's embrace of religion or harsh critique of it .

This paper is divided into two chapters . The first section of chapter one tackles the insecure Melville and some important spot lights of his background , while section two deals with the treatment of *Billy Budd* from Christian point of view . The second chapter is also divided into two sections ; the first deals with *Billy Budd* socially

and logically , while section two is conclusions .

## *Chapter One*

### *Section I : The Insecure Melville .*

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York city into a well-to-do aristocratic family . He was not a particularly easy father or husband . His great novels written by his early 30's . Melville sank slowly over that next 30 years into depressive oblivion in a yellow brick townhouse on East 26th Street , leaving the pages of a masterpiece *Billy Budd* to be discovered in a bread box . Melville was accused as homosexual . His sexual adventures may have occurred at sea and in foreign ports , and insane as his family had examined him by a doctor on psychological grounds . His muzzle was the source of his agony that pushed him to beat his wife Lizzie to behave abusively more often verbally than physically for his intention was evidently to humiliate .

Melville was surely a manic depressive (WWW.Weiss) . He seems to have suffered a breakdown and had suicidal ideas . He was described as unwell for ten years after doing long trips , urged on by his relatives , who hoped that he would recover his mental stability . His misery caused his relation with his family extremely bad to the extent that Melville's firstborn son , Malcolm, committed suicide at 18 when the boy came home from work , locked himself in his room , and put a bullet through his own head .His next son died a drifter , one daughter was a spinster , and the last daughter reportedly did not want to hear her father's name , regarding him as a beast (Ibid) .

As a young man in the 1840's , Melville became famous for stirring narratives , *Typee* and *Omoo*, then *Moby Dick* , *Pierre* , and *Confidence-Man* . After a decade of *Moby Dick* , Melville wrote *Billy Budd* as undiscovered until 1920 and unfinished narrative during his

lifetime . It is a short book , and yet it seems to hold a world of meaning . It reflects the wisdom and peace that the writer attained at the end of his life .

Melville found that he had opened a fertile field that is sea novel . This idea came from the fact that people were growing weary of shipwrecks and fires at sea . Every possible incident that could occur . People also were interested in knowing sailors' life ; what they ate , what they drank , their language , their loves , their grievances , and their mutinies . So , Melville came forward with his books to present this state of well informed dullness when he mixed the fresh land scenery with some scenes of ship-life .

Though Melville lived in an insecure life, he was somebody else in his works .He presented his healthy first book *Typee* (1846 ) then *Omoo* (1847) nearly so . After that came *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (1849 ) as it is intended to embody all the philosophy of Melville . Then later came *Moby Dick* (1851 ) and *Pierre* (1852 ) with its inexcusable insanity . His language is rich and heavy with imageries . He is essentially exoterical in feelings . His dreams are material . His philosophy is sensual . Beautiful women , shadowy lakes , nodding , plummy trees make Melville's scenery .

Melville's success was in sea-romances . He saw himself in the tales of Atlantic and Pacific Oceans . He believes that the superstition of life on the waves is much beautiful that may inspire the conception of the fondness a ship (WWW. Nathaniel) . Some of the sea pictures are worthy of Melville's highest mood when a wild imagination takes a place with moonlight , breeze of the mid-sea , and the details of the lonely sea.

## *Section II : Billy Budd from Christian Point of View .*

*Billy Budd* was never published in Melville's lifetime . It remained uncollected , unfinished , and undiscovered until 1924 . Various titles have been attached to it : *Billy Budd* ; *Billy Budd , Sailor* ; *Billy Budd , foretopman* . Melville left this novella in the form of a working manuscript , full of cross-outs and alternate word choices and phrases . Several scholars have gone back to the original manuscript and tried to come up with a text that is closest to what Melville intended . This is why there are different versions of the text of *Billy Budd* with different titles , chapter breaks , and many other minor variations . One of these differences was the name of the ship on which the story takes place . In the earlier editions , it is called the Indomitable , while the most recent edition it is called the Bellipotent . Evidently , the symbolic elements of the story began with the name of the ship when the warship Bellipotent extracts the unassuming Billy from his former ship , The Right-of-Man. Society is powerful , it compels men into participation in war , and in doing so it can readily dispense with the rights of the individuals . On the other hand, Bellipotent symbolizes society , with the actions of a few characters who stand for the state of human society in general . The various ships in the story represent the various types of societies . For example , The Right-of-Man symbolizes the place where man maintains his individuality and identity , while Bellipotent symbolizes the military aspect in the world . The threatening violence and the presence of evil affected both upon society to deprive individuals from their rights . In addition , the other ship ,the Athee , whose name means the atheist , in French , symbolizes the anti-religious aspects of a powerful , war-driven society . This ship defeated the Bellipotent which carried the characters who stand for Christian figures , the event suggests that Christian society moves toward a disastrous fall from grace as it becomes more dependent on violence and military discipline .

In fact, *Billy Budd* contains many implicit allusions to the imagery, language, and stories of the Bible, creating a sustained parallel between *Billy's* story and Christ's. Captain Vere and Claggart are the main characters beside Billy who made the events to seem look like the story of Christ's suffering and death on the cross.

Clearly, Melville loads down his novella with Christ imagery (WWW.GradSaver). Billy embodies the passion and echoes of Christ, and Claggart embodies Satan. The Story finishes not with the images of Billy in paradise, but rather with his death in the dark murk of the sea.

In creating Billy Budd, Melville forms a character who is but a half-Christ, more like the child than the man innocent and never maliciously harmful but he little resembles the mature man. Melville's hero depicts the inevitable destruction of a man who is all heart but utterly lacks insight. Like Christ, Bill sacrifices his life as the innocent victim of a hostile society and he endures a persecution similar to Christ's; he is executed for no reason, and he eventually ascends taking "*the full rose of the dawn*" (BB, 376).

Melville's philosophy is that innocence which unaccompanied by wisdom, must inevitably meet with destruction when a man balances his heart much against the wisdom of his head. So, Billy Budd may possess the heart of Christ in that he usually unconditionally loves others but he lacks "any trace of wisdom of the serpent" nor is he "*yet quite a dove*" (Ibid, 300). He owns the childlike faith of innocence depending on Christ's thought that to enter heaven, one must become like a little child (Matt., 18:2-3). Many critics inferred from this that from a Christian perspective, childlike ignorance must be good while experience and wisdom must be bad. But this thought may take us away from what Christ thinks as we also think that be "*wise as serpent*" as well "*harmless as doves*" (Matt., 10:16). However, this innocence, to Billy, implies ignorance rather than mere moral purity that distinguishes Billy Budd from the

experienced and aware Christ . Billy's innocence reaches the point of naivety that stands against the evil and depravity of Claggart . This innocence is a central part of Billy's beauty and charisma , but it is also part of what dooms him . Billy is handsome , innocent , and harmless , yet he kills . Claggart is evil , perverted , mendacious , yet he dies a victim . Though some critics state that Billy's innocence does not mean that Billy is a hero , though he has the good looks and blithe attitude of the ideal handsome sailor , his defining characteristics is extreme naïveté , not moral strength or courage (WWW.Sparknotes) . Bill has no sufficient awareness of good and evil to distinguish between them and to choose goodness consciously . He easily allows Claggart to draw him away from virtue into violence for he is unable to recognize evil when confronted by it . Claggart, on the other hand , is depraved by nature . He did not learn to be evil by associating with evil people or picking up bad habits . His evil is inborn (Salami , 24) .Actually, his appearance has no bad habits that can be distinguished on the outside . He is straight , clean living , calm, and rational .He functions all his power of intelligent mind for hatred purposes , but he does so in secret . Claggart plays as a satanic figure , tempting Billy into evil and working to destroy him throughout the novel . His temptation of Billy more closely mirrors the serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden than anything in the Gospel .

In *Billy Budd* , the role of the judge and leader is played by the honorable Edward Fairfax Vere , the commander of the Bellipotent , whose name suggests his tendency to veer between attitudes. He is a member of the English aristocracy . In fact, Vere is the name of a noble family that was especially prominent in the seventeenth century . A bachelor of 40 years old (Ibid) . Captain Vere's dilemma arises from Vere's very nature . He is characterized in the story as a man who heeds his duty . He is a leader and a thinker , a man of deep feeling but also a stickler for details , a man with strong personal opinions but with stronger sense of duty . Duty is intellectual rather

than emotional and captain Vere is described as possessing a marked leaning toward everything intellectual . "Vere" as a name signifies both "truth" and "man" .

Evidently , Vere's suffering is greater than Billy's . The ordeal of the sentence and the hanging is worse for Vere than it is to Billy (Chase ,262) . He is twice compared to suffering Biblical fathers . He is by implication like Jacob , "the troubled patriarch" , who has "the blood-dyed coat of young Joseph" thrust upon him (BB , 346) . He also resembles Abraham who does not wish to sacrifice his son Ismail but who yet sets out to obey God's command (WWW.Burris) . Vere is not wholly intellect for his suffering proves his heartfelt emotions . He , like Christ, must overcome his feelings in order to do what is best for the nation . He is "*no lover of authority for mere authority's sake*"(BB , 355). His critical situation is that he has to make his choice between the individual justice or communal justice for in the fate of Billy possibly rests the fate of an entire nation (Sten ,192) . He cannot allow "*worm hearts*" to betray "*heads that should be cool*"(BB ,362) . Vere is compassionate and wise in which he administers justice in the name of institution which in turn empowered him . He is legally right , but he is morally wrong as he thought that he made the only decision possible as a captain of the Bellipotent and he must look out for the welfare of the whole ship , not just the fate of one man . His decision to execute Billy considers priority . His conflict lies in the more he sees of Billy, the more he loves him to feel himself as Billy's father that he has to sacrifice his son . He has to uphold the law that Billy must be hanged though his ultimate knowledge of Billy's innocence .

Again with *Billy Budd*, Melville intends to allude to Jesus Christ when he describes Billy Budd , but this could be partial specially when the reader starts to distinguish between them in different situations. For example , Billy has no idea about his origin , he does not know where he was born as he is not sure about his identity when he was asked about his father , he answered "*God*

*knows , sir*"(BB ,300) . In contrast, Christ knows exactly his birthplace and his father and at the age of twelve , he is already *"about His Father's business"*(Luke ,2:49) . Billy is *"illiterate "*(BB ,301) ,while Christ is so learned that *" the people were amazed at His teaching"*(Mark 1:22) . Billy suffers from the vocal infirmity *"He tried to speak ...but he could not say his words clearly .Sometimes , Billy becomes very angry . Then he stutters "*(BB ,40) . But Christ's words are so clear and memorable that go fluent *"will by no means pass away "*(Mark 13:31) . Billy was not aware of Claggart envious intentions towards him for Claggart feels jealous of Billy's popularity and feels justified by *"a sort of retributive righteousness "*(BB , 330) . While Christ is repeatedly and knowingly escapes from the Pharisees who are *"lying in wait for Him"*(Luke 11:54) .Christ's cleverness and wisdom function always to serve him for he recognizes that the world is full of wolves and warns his disciples to *"beware of men"* (Matt., 10:16-17) . But Billy stands doing nothing in making of his opinion and decision when he approached to a man who suggested the mutiny .

Actually, Christ is faced with a similar trap and then he escapes . The disciples of the Pharisees ask him whether or not the Jews should pay tribute to Caesar . If Christ answers yes, he offends the Jews who consider God, and not Caesar , their king . but if he answers no, his response could be interpreted as an act of rebellion (mutiny) against the Roman government (Richards, 624) . He realizes their wickedness , whereas Billy faces the mutinous assertion by using threatening violence.

Billy's naivety makes him shocked by Claggart's accusation in which even captain Vere is surely predisposed to believe Billy , yet the naïve is unable to answer the charge although the captain wanted Billy to take his time to reply and to ensure him that he believes Billy whatever he says when the captain benevolently put his hand on Billy's shoulder. While Christ knows that he is about to be betrayed *"Then Jesus told the followers , 'You will all stumble in your faith ,*



*because it is written in the Scriptures : " I will kill the shepherd, and the sheep will scatter"(Mark, 14:41-42) . Christ prevents Peter from issuing a possible death blow to the high priest's servant because he believes his "crucifixion is necessary" (John, 18:10-11) . Billy ensures his death by killing Claggart with a blow and this indicates inturn that he lacks the wisdom and experience and the feeling of the importance of his existence . He defenses himself by few words only as "Could I have used my tongue , I would not have struck him. But...I had to say something , and I could only say it with a blow"(BB ,357) .On the other hand , Billy does not have fear of death and he never asks captain Vere to alter his punishment for he envisions Vere as his kindly father .Billy, upon his hanging , exclaims :"*God bless Captain Vere*"(Ibid , 375) . But Christ walks knowingly towards his death after spending a sleepless night in Gethsemane . He began to be troubled and deeply distressed and begged his father "*if it were possible to spare him from death*"(Mark , 14:35-36). He says to his father on the cross when he feels intimately betrayed at the moment of his crucifixion and cries : "*My God , My God , why have You forsaken Me ?*"(Mark, 15:33) . With a very important note, that Christ's death and the situation of his death exists as a necessary even before his birth that Christ dies for the sins of others for religious order and the gathering "*together in one the children of God*" (John ,11:52) , while Billy Budd never has to die until he himself creates the appearance of mutiny and sacrifices himself for nothing and dies for his own crime .*

## Chapter Two

### Section I : Billy Budd: Logic and Social Treatment

Billy is an example of Melville's fascination with ideas of man in a state of perfect nature . He is an idealized version of manhood and humanity . Melville shows his hero as a youthful , handsome , and popular sailor in which the latter wishes only to be well liked and well adjusted in his social role . This handsome sailor is a motif of the novella. Billy is physically beautiful as the narrator calls him "welkin-eyed" as a man who owns the sky-colored shade of blue in addition to his beautiful body and when he is in nude , he could pose as Adam before the fall (WWW.GradeSaver) . Billy's last name , Budd, suggests his youth by conjuring an image of a flower's bud. He is distinguished by his appearance , simplicity , and his goodness that gives him a magical effect on the tempers of the other men . This pushes Lieutenant Ratcliff , the ship officer , to choose Billy before all the other men to come on deck for inspection . In addition, Billy is physically powerful that the same power dooms him .

Arguably, the beauty of Billy was in debate for Melville concentrated much on Billy's beauty as homoerotic content to excite desire in the men around him . The sight of his face and body gives pleasure to other men as it is the same implicit lusty desire that Claggart feels for Billy , which is part of the origin of the master-at-arms' hatred for Billy . The nature and degree of that pleasure varies with each man . Officers notice him :

*Little did he observe that something about him provoked an ambiguous smile in one or two harder faces among the bluejackets. Nor less unaware was he of the peculiar favorable effect his person and demeanor had upon the more intelligent gentlemen of the quarter-deck.*

(BB ,299)

On the other hand, all the events in *Billy's* story emphasizes the impossibility of making a fair decision about his fate . Melville gives many ways of looking at his fate from the point of view of what is essentially right and wrong , from a legal standpoint, from a religious connection , and from the perspective of basic human compassion that forces man to make a choice ( Salami ,29-30) . The fate of Billy is connected with the law that deals with the complexities of man's nature as it is connected with the stutter of Billy when he finds himself in an emotional situation . His case dooms him also to refute Claggart's accusation of mutiny by words but to refuse the latter's words only by a killing blows and could only dumbly gesture and gurgle in a convulsed tongue-tied as Billy himself explains when testifying to the drum court :

*could I have used my tongue I would not  
have struck him. But he foully lied to my  
face and in the presence of my captain,  
and I had to say something and I could  
only say it with a blow , God help me .*

(BB ,338)

Though Billy is fundamentally good and innocent and liked by all, and Claggart is the embodiment of evil and Satan , but the legality of law demands that Billy should be hanged for murder . That handsome sailor , adored by his shipmates for his intrinsic goodness is condemned to death by a seemingly formalistic and unfeeling legal system . In fact, legal system's failure to consider the natural law that implies Billy's blow and his innocence induces us to question the justice of Vere's decision . The man-made law may clash with the natural law arguing first the religious point of view that goodness should be praised and evil should be punished , second, the logical conception that legal term refers to a "guilty mind" , where

theoretically , a crime is defined only when the perpetrator commits it with a "guilty mind" or premeditated guilty intentions . Therefore, a harmful action done by one honestly ignorant of its harmful quality ought not to be condemned and punished . Actually, in taking the decision of hanging of Billy, Melville made a relevance of the events of his story with a particular historical context, when the narrator evokes the historical events such as the mutinies at Spithead and Nore , known as the "Great Mutiny" , sailors at Nore rebelled against the ship authorities and demanded equal wage increases . Although eventually quelled, the mutiny instilled a prevailing and legitimate fear in navy commanders of more rebellions from their sailors , many of whom were unhappily impressed into service . Billy's treason in striking Claggart occurs only six months after the "Great Mutiny" (WWW.GradeSaver) . So, when deciding Billy's verdict, naturally Vere is concerned with its impressions on the crew as :

*feeling that unless quick action was taken on it,  
the deed of the foretopman...would tend to awaken  
any slumbering embers of the Nore among the  
crew.*

(BB ,336)

Therefore, Vere adheres to his judge and refuses to mitigate Billy's sentence justifying himself as mutiny represents opposition to war and it also represents individuality and agency in the face of authority and makes mutinous men separated and dissenters from the authoritarian force that represents law :

*most of the crew is familiar with our naval;  
tradition; how would they take it...to the  
people the foretopman's deed...will be plain  
homicide committed in the flagrant act of*

*mutiny .What penalty for that they know.  
It does not follow .Why? They will ruminare...  
will they not revert to the recent outbreak  
the Nore ?*

(BB ,344)

Criticism of Billy's execution therefore should not be directed entirely at Vere , but more at the insensate , man-made law .

## *Section II : Conclusions .*

Melville's *Billy Budd* is a story about the distinction between divine justice , on the one hand, and human justice , on the other . It shows that evil , embodied by Claggart, exists to corrupt innocence , embodied by Billy .

The story presents the evil that sum up all crises ; evil stands for the goodness and sometimes get victory over it .Evil men like Claggart seem to be lurking everywhere . They not only disguise their own insidious designs , they also impute evil motives to others for it is impossible to know for sure whether people's intentions are good or evil. This victory of evil may gain with the absence of wisdom of the mind . In *Billy Budd* ,Melville rejects the extreme of the heart when Billy represents the heart of Christ , yet he bears no likeness to Christ's mind . Billy has to learn to balance the impulses of the heart against the wisdom of the head.

Laws govern society in order to fill a social role well, it may sometimes be necessary to act against one's own will . Billy's tragic execution exposes that man-made laws often punish actions driven by natural laws , or laws instinctive to humans .

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