

Billy Budd, Sailor

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Herman Melville

YEAR PUBLISHED

1924

GENRE

Allegory

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Billy Budd, Sailor is told in the third-person omniscient voice by a narrator whose telling may or may not be entirely objective and true as he often confesses to limited knowledge of the

story.

TENSE

Billy Budd, Sailor is told in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Billy Budd is a sailor on the British warship *Bellipotent*. Being the titular character emphasizes Budd's experiences and search for identity as a beautiful young sailor who is forcibly recruited into serving in the British navy.

🕒 In Context

Naval Supremacy

Billy Budd takes place during the 18th century, when England and France fought battles over who would have naval supremacy. Between 1688 and 1763 they fought in four major wars, most of which were won by the British. These victories were a key factor in England's later important victories over French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte, who sought to conquer England. Instead Napoleon was defeated in 1805 by Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar. These battles gave the British control of the sea and initiated a period of peace, known as the Pax Britannica, which lasted through the 19th century.

Impressment

The British navy of the 18th century solved its manpower shortage by a type of kidnapping, called impressment, as was the case with Budd. Voluntary enlistment was low, and officers frequently boarded merchant vessels, seized unwilling sailors, and forced them onto warships to serve in the British navy. Sometimes violent gangs were used to impress into service

lower-class civilian men who lived in English port cities. Men were seized from pubs, brothels, and boardinghouses. Vagrants were picked up off the streets. As one might expect, unsavory characters were often impressed into service, and they sometimes made shipboard a dangerous place for other sailors. The frequent brutality and inhumanity of impressment eventually led to laws moderating its use.

American ships were common targets of British vessels seeking to impress sailors. It's estimated that between 1793 and 1812 more than 15,000 American sailors were impressed into the British navy. This so outraged the United States that it became a key factor in the outbreak of the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain.

Harsh Treatment and Mutiny

A sailor's life aboard an 18th-century British warship was harsh. Strict discipline was enforced by punishment for the slightest infraction of the rules. Sailors who shirked their duties or didn't follow orders were severely punished. Flogging with a cat o' nine tails was a common tool of punishment. Flogging was always carried out in public before the entire crew.

Mutinies were an ever-present threat. Impressed sailors resented their harsh treatment and dreadful living conditions. Sailors were poorly paid, and shipboard food was very bad (and there was often too little of it). Sailors sometimes mutinied against a particularly harsh and unjust commander.

Narrative Style

The narrator recounts something that happened long ago and therefore has no direct knowledge of what actually occurred. The narrator admits this but speculates on the thoughts, motives, and actions of the key characters. Yet the narrator fails to divulge some important information, such as exactly why Claggart hates Budd so much or what was said when Captain Vere told Budd of his upcoming execution. The reader should be alert to those parts of the narrative that are presented as truthful (even if they're unsubstantiated) and those that are made up or even seemingly omitted. The narrator claims to be objective, and thus truthful, but that is not always the case.

The narrator compensates for his inability to tell the complete

truth of the story by elevating his language to make himself seem more "upper class" and more educated, trustworthy, and "civilized." Melville exploits the assumption that a well-educated man of the upper classes would naturally tell a more truthful story than a lower-class narrator. The reader might better understand the story by rewording some of the more complicated language and "translating" it into plain English. For example, "Something less unpleasingly oracular he tried to extract" might be reworded as "he tried to get a simpler answer."

The narrator goes off on a tangent to discuss some historical or cultural event or person. Although this might seem out of place, a careful reading reveals most digressions shed more light on the action taking place or about to take place. Additionally the narrator frequently includes allusions to historical figures or events and makes numerous references to the Bible.

Situational Irony or Resignation

There are two camps among literary critics interpreting *Billy Budd*. One group insists the story—and especially the ending (Budd's death)—indicates the world-weary Melville's resignation to the power of authority. Budd is executed because civilization is based on laws that must be carried out to the letter; what Melville calls "measured forms" are necessary to maintain social order. Melville writes, "With mankind ... forms, measured forms, are everything ... [and] the disruption of forms [leads to what is] going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof." Here Melville states disruption or compromising of forms (authoritarian laws) undermines society and leads to anarchy, such as the chaos and bloodshed of the French Revolution. These critics assert Melville accepts "that the rule of law is a condition of civilization and is prior to justice and mercy," as scholar William Bartley puts it.

Other critics insist Melville—a staunch supporter of freedom whose grandfather was a hero at the Battle of Bunker Hill—cannot possibly be taking the side of Captain Vere in carrying out an unjust law to condemn Budd. They assert Melville is using irony—words and situations that convey the opposite of their literal meaning—to undermine what on the surface appears to be an educated man's recounting of actual events. There is situational irony in characters: Budd is portrayed as superhumanly mild, peaceful, and innocent—until

he murders Claggart. Claggart, the villain of the story, ends up being a sympathetic victim of Budd's violence. Nothing is as it seems, and the fate of these characters is the exact opposite of what their inner natures would produce. The innocent is guilty; the villain is martyred.

The narrator uses verbal irony as well. His high-brow language puts the narrator in league with the defenders of harsh, uncompromising law. The narrator uses erudite language to describe Captain Vere as a good and fair man. The Latin root *ver* means "truth." He uses the same style to show Vere's willingness to condemn Budd based on the uncorroborated rumor (Budd's planned mutiny) Claggart whispers in Vere's ear. What some critics call Melville's "high diction" is used to suggest his narrator's objectivity and reliability. At the same time that language is used to attack the values (laws) of those born into the upper echelons of British society. For these critics the style is built on verbal irony. The narrator seems to support the unjust application of the law, yet he also undermines the law by using the language of the upholders of the unjust law. Melville therefore emphasizes the terrible cost of enforcing merciless laws that underpin civilization. The reader should note, however, that the verbal irony in no way detracts from the poetry and the rhythm of Melville's writing.

American Romanticism

Melville lived and wrote during the Romantic period in American literature, which emphasized the human connection with nature, an idealized view of the individual, and belief in the power of human imagination and intuition. Melville shared this literary approach with other great writers of the Romantic era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. American Romanticism in literature has been defined by *A Handbook to Literature* as "a literary and philosophical theory that tends to see the individual at the center of all life, and it places the individual, therefore, at the center of art ... Although romanticism tends at times to regard nature as alien, it more often sees in nature a revelation of Truth ... and a more suitable subject for art than those aspects of the world sullied by artifice. Romanticism seeks to find the Absolute, the ideal, by transcending the actual."

In *Billy Budd* the "center of the art" is a focus on Budd, the individual and his "unique" qualities. Budd is the "ideal" that transcends the "actual" real life. However, he is presented as a type of "Truth" that is in fact sullied by the artifice or malicious

rumor mongering and lying of Claggart and even the strict adherence to the law of Vere. The story told in *Billy Budd* may or may not be true. It is certainly "incomplete" in its telling and meaning, and in this way it exemplifies a Romantic work of literature.

Religious Allegory

An allegory imposes symbolic meaning on fictional characters and events to illuminate some truth of human nature and experience. *Billy Budd* is often interpreted as a biblical allegory based on Christ and the crucifixion. The narrator quotes or liberally references the Bible to shape the allegory. Budd is often likened to Jesus in his otherworldly characteristics—his purity and innocence. As a Christ-like figure Budd's execution reveals modern society and its laws are no better than the ancient laws that led to Jesus's crucifixion. Budd is also compared to Adam, the first man, who is without sin in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. By comparing Budd to Adam the author connects knowledge (from the Garden's Tree of Knowledge as well as in modern human society) to sinfulness. Budd cannot comprehend the baseness of human nature just as Adam in the Garden did not know he was naked until he ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

Literary, Historic, and Biblical Allusions

The text alludes to people and events from literature (mainly ancient classics), history (mainly British military), and the Bible.

Literary

- **Hawthorne (Chapter 2):** (1804–64) an American novelist and short story writer.
- **Charles Dibdin (Chapter 3):** (1745–1814) a British writer who wrote more than 600 songs.
- **Old Merlin (Chapter 9):** the wise wizard in the tales of King Arthur; he is used to describe Dansker.
- **Chiron instructing Achilles (Chapter 9):** in Greek mythology a centaur who raised and educated the warrior Achilles.
- **Plato (Chapter 11):** Greek philosopher who wrote on human

nature, the nature of reality and experience, and other philosophical topics.

- **The Mysteries of Udolpho (Chapter 11):** (1794) Gothic novel of romance and mystery by Ann Radcliffe; it was wildly popular.
- **Delphic (Chapter 15):** the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi who couched pronouncements and predictions in cryptic terms.
- **Hyperion (Chapter 17):** a god in Greek mythology associated with the sun.
- **Mars (Chapter 21):** in ancient Roman mythology the god of war.

Historic

- **Aldebaran (Chapter 1):** giant star in the constellation Taurus.
- **Anacharsis Cloots (Chapter 1):** (1755–94) a Prussian nobleman who went to France to support the French Revolution. Although he was innocent, he was guillotined during the Reign of Terror.
- **Alexander and Bucephalus (Chapter 1):** Macedonian warrior and conqueror Alexander the Great (356–33 BCE) and his horse, Bucephalus.
- **Thomas Paine (Chapter 1):** (1737–1809) one of America's Founding Fathers. He was a philosopher, political activist, and revolutionary. He wrote the *Rights of Man* (1791) in support of the French Revolution and as a call for individual rights and freedoms. He was a key voice calling for independence from Britain for the American colonies.
- **Joachim-Napoleon Murat (Chapter 1):** (1767–1815) an admiral under Napoleon Bonaparte and known as a dandy for the fancy clothes he wore.
- **Caspar Hauser (Chapter 2):** (died 1833) a German man who claimed to have spent most of his life locked alone in a cell, knowing nothing of the world. Experts have since refuted his story.
- **Nelson at the Nile (Chapter 3):** Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805), who oversaw the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of the Nile (1798).
- **Nelson at Trafalgar (Chapter 3):** refers to the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) in which Nelson defeated 33 ships and gained a decisive victory over Napoleon.
- **Don John of Austria (Chapter 4):** a Spanish admiral under King Philip II of Spain; he defeated the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto (1571).
- **Jean Bart (Chapter 4):** (1650–1702) a French naval commander during the Nine Years' War (1688–97).
- **American Decatur (Chapter 4):** refers to Stephen Decatur (1779–1820), a commander in the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812.
- **Admiral Wellington at Waterloo (Chapter 4):** refers to Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.
- **Rev. Dr. Titus Oates (Chapter 8):** (1649–1705) fabricated a story of a Popish plot to overthrow King Charles II of England.
- **Luís Vaz de Camões (Chapter 8):** (1524–80) one of Portugal's greatest poets. The "Spirit of the Cape" recounts the Spanish victory over anti-Christian forces.
- **Admiral Nelson and the Agamemnon (Chapter 9):** Nelson was the commander of the ship *Agamemnon* in 1793 when he fought against the French at Corsica.
- **Calvin and Calvinism (Chapter 11):** John Calvin (1509–64) was a Protestant reformer who taught sinfulness underlies all of human nature, which is "depraved." Calvin established a bleak theocracy in Geneva, Switzerland, which he ruled with rigid authority.
- **Guy Fawkes (Chapter 13):** (1570–1606) a British Catholic who executed the failed Gunpowder Plot (1605) to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Fawkes was tortured and executed. To this day the British celebrate Guy Fawkes Day (November 5) to commemorate his capture and death as well as the survival of the British government.
- **Peter the Barbarian (Chapter 21):** refers to Peter the Great of Russia (Tsar Peter I) (1682–1725) and his generally repressive reign, as well as murders that occurred at Peter's court.
- **USS Somers (Chapter 21):** In November 1842 a mutiny erupted on the ship. Captain Mackenzie executed, flogged, or imprisoned sailors after a shipboard trial. Melville likely heard about this from his cousin, Lt. Gansevoort, who was an officer on the ship.
- **Germanicus (Chapter 24):** successful Roman general who was the nephew and adopted son of Emperor Tiberius. Germanicus died before he could become emperor.
- **Fra Angelico (Chapter 24):** (1395–1455) an Italian Renaissance painter known for his religious works; he was also a Dominican friar.

Biblical

- **Cain's city (Chapter 2):** Cain killed his brother, Abel. God exiled him and he settled in the land of Nod, where he

established a city.

- **Jonah's toss (Chapter 11):** a prophet of the Old Testament who is believed to have lived in the eighth century BCE. A storm arises when Jonah and other sailors are at sea. Jonah says the storm will cease only if he is "tossed" overboard. The sailors do that and the storm stops. Later Jonah is swallowed by a whale.
- **Saul brooding on the comely David (Chapter 12):** King of Israel until he's told God no longer wants him to rule. Saul becomes mentally unstable and asks for music to soothe his mind. David, a beautiful youth, is sent to play the harp. Saul is soothed by David's playing but becomes envious of him. David becomes a great warrior and eventually king of Israel.
- **Pharisee (Chapter 13):** their insistence on people following the letter of the law got them into trouble with the burgeoning of Christianity. Their literal interpretation of religious law has given the word *Pharisee* its current meaning: an arrogant and self-righteous person more concerned with the letter of the law than its spirit.
- **Jacob's children with Joseph's coat (Chapter 18):** Joseph got a "coat of many colors" from his father, Jacob. Joseph's brothers envied him and conspired to kill him. Instead one brother had Joseph thrown into a pit and stained his coat with goat's blood. The brothers brought the coat to Jacob to "prove" Joseph had been killed. Instead Joseph is found and sold into slavery.
- **Divine judgment on Ananias (Chapter 19):** Ananias hides some money from the sale of his possessions, giving the balance to the Apostles. Peter reveals the deception, and Ananias dies upon hearing it. The allusion is to Ananias as the iconic liar.
- **Mystery of iniquity (Chapter 21):** A biblical phrase associated with the End of Times when the "man of sin" (the Antichrist) will be revealed and destroyed. The quote reads, "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way."

Author Biography

Early Life

Herman Melville, the third of eight children, was born in New York City on August 1, 1819. His father, Allan Melvill (spelling changed to Melville after his death), operated an importing

business, but it fared very poorly. In 1830 Allan moved from New York City with his family to Albany. He was deeply in debt and sought loans and aid from his family. Allan Melvill died two years later in 1832.

At age 13 Melville went to work as a clerk at an Albany bank, and then he worked for his older brother's cap and fur business, which failed. He also worked briefly as a teacher and studied to become a surveyor for the Erie Canal, which was then being constructed.

Experiences at Sea

In 1839 with his prospects in Albany dim, Melville found a job as a cabin boy on a merchant ship traveling from New York City to Liverpool, England. This experience would later form the basis for his novel *Redburn* (1849). Afterward he returned to a teaching position near Albany, but by 1841 he had signed onto service aboard a whaling ship, not returning to America until 1844. His adventures, which included jumping ship and being captured by cannibals, were the basis of a number of his works, including his first novel, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, published in 1846. This first novel would be Melville's greatest financial success. In 1847 Melville married New York native Elizabeth Shaw, and the couple eventually had four children.

Success and Failure as a Novelist

Melville's second novel, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, was published in 1847 as a sequel to *Typee*, and it too was well received. His third novel, *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither*, took a much more philosophical turn than his previous work. Published in 1849, it was widely rejected by critics. Subsequently Melville returned to the seafaring tales that had won him some critical acclaim.

In 1851 Melville published his sixth novel and signature classic *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, but it was a critical and commercial failure. He then turned instead to publishing serializations and short fiction in *Harper's* and *Putnam's* monthly magazines. It was in 1853, during this period, that he published "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" in two installments in

Putnam's. The tale of an alienated office worker who refuses to work might have represented Melville's difficulty in maintaining success as a writer. The story was later collected in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). He published his last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, in 1857.

Impoverished Old Age

In 1866, unable to support his family by writing, Melville took a position as an inspector with the U.S. Customs Service, working on the docks in New York City, a position he would hold for nearly 20 years. During this time he focused on writing poetry.

Posthumous Publication

At the time of his death on September 28, 1891, Melville left behind the short novel *Billy Budd, Sailor*, still in manuscript form and possibly unfinished by the author. It is believed that Melville worked on *Billy Budd* during the period between 1886 and 1891. The first edition was published in 1924, but the definitive edition came out in 1962. By the time of his death Melville's writing had fallen largely into obscurity, but later reprints of his works brought much acclaim and secured his reputation as one of America's greatest novelists.

Characters

Billy Budd

Billy Budd is beautiful and innocent of the world, but he is naïve about its darker side. He totally lacks cynicism and the ability to detect evil intent in others. This proves to be his greatest vulnerability and, ultimately, his downfall. Budd may be viewed as a Christ-like figure who is both admired for his purity and yet pitied for his lack of worldliness. Budd can neither recognize nor fathom others' evil intentions. He is unaware of John Claggart's devious conspiracy to destroy him. Budd is as incapable of seeing or opposing evil as he is of putting on false appearances.

John Claggart

Outwardly, John Claggart seems reasonable and dutiful, but inwardly he is said to be "evil." Claggart harbors an intense envy—which turns to hatred—of Billy Budd, whose purity and beauty he cannot abide and is driven to destroy. It is Claggart who conspires in Budd's downfall. In contrast to Budd, Claggart is a master of deception and is able to hide his malevolence until he is ready to strike.

Captain Vere

Captain Vere is presented as a sympathetic character who sees the unspoiled goodness in Billy Budd. But Vere is also a ship's commander who must carry out British naval law. He is torn between his recognition of Budd's purity and goodness and his duty to enforce draconian naval laws, even if they compromise his conscience.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Billy Budd	Billy Budd is a young, handsome sailor whose innocence and serene temperament endear him to almost everyone on board the warship <i>Bellipotent</i> .
John Claggart	John Claggart is the master-at-arms, or chief police officer, of the ship. It's his job to keep order and enforce the rules.
Captain Vere	Captain Edward Vere is the captain and highest authority on the <i>Bellipotent</i> . As such he is anxious to maintain order and oversee regulations.
Afterguardsman	The afterguardsman is a mysterious sailor who awakens Budd and offers him two guineas for his cooperation in some unspecified conspiracy (likely a mutiny).
Albert	Albert is Captain Vere's hammock boy who brings the accused Budd to Vere's cabin.
Chaplain	The ship's chaplain realizes that Budd is at peace with his impending death. This serenity somewhat disconcerts the chaplain, but he acknowledges Budd's spiritual purity.
Dansker	Budd's confidant on the ship, Dansker is an experienced and wise sailor and man of the world who sometimes advises Budd but frequently makes obscure and ominous statements whose meaning is unclear.
Captain Graveling	Captain Graveling is the good-natured captain of the ship <i>Rights-of-Man</i> who is sorry to lose Budd to the <i>Bellipotent</i> .

Purser	The "accountant" on the ship, Purser believes that Budd's death revealed Budd's supernatural will power.
Lieutenant Ratcliffe	The boarding officer of the <i>Bellipotent</i> , Lieutenant Ratcliffe selects only Billy Budd from the <i>Rights-of-Man</i> to impress into service on the <i>Bellipotent</i> .
Red Pepper	Red Pepper is a sailor who upbraids Budd for not taking action against another sailor who tried to lure him into corruption and conspiracy.
Red Whiskers	Red Whiskers is a sailor on the <i>Rights-of-Man</i> who Budd hits. In contrast to the incident on the <i>Bellipotent</i> with Claggart, after being hit by Budd Red Whiskers feels his hatred of Budd turn to love for him.
Squeak	Squeak is Claggart's underling in shipboard law enforcement and, essentially, an instrument for carrying out Claggart's plot against Billy Budd. Squeak is sly and nefarious (he fuels Claggart's hatred), and he torments Budd.
Surgeon	The ship's surgeon affirms Claggart is dead; he also thinks Vere's decision on a trial and sentence is overhasty. He argues with the Purser, saying Budd's death was natural, not supernatural.

Plot Summary

Naval Wars

It is the late 18th century when Britain and France are engaged in near constant naval battles for control of the seas around Europe. Britain is having a hard time enlisting volunteers into its navy to man its warships. When the story opens, Lieutenant Ratcliffe of the warship *Bellipotent* has boarded the merchant vessel *Rights-of-Man*. Ratcliffe is there to impress sailors for

duty on the warship. He sees Billy Budd and takes him as the only impressed sailor to serve on the *Bellipotent*. Instead of resisting impressment, as most sailors would do, Budd cheerfully follows Ratcliffe to the warship.

Billy Budd

Billy Budd is a beautiful and innocent young man who quickly becomes a favorite among the sailors on the warship. He is also an able and willing hard worker. He is assigned to be one of the ship's foretopmen.

Budd works diligently and tries to stay out of trouble. He is confused by the unwelcome attention he gets, especially from the master-at-arms John Claggart, for the few minor infractions or accidents he's involved in. Budd confides in Dansker, an experienced but rather inscrutable sailor on board the ship. Dansker tells Budd he should watch out for Claggart, who nurses a hatred for Budd. Budd cannot comprehend hatred in others as he is incapable of that emotion himself. Thus Budd does not believe Dansker or take his advice.

Malice and Conspiracy

Sometime later at lunch Budd accidentally spills his soup. Some of the soup flows toward the feet of Claggart, who happens to be passing nearby. Claggart makes a lame joke of the incident, which makes the other sailors laugh. Claggart's lighthearted response to the incident makes Budd feel there is no animosity between them. Secretly, however, Claggart views the incident as proof that Budd is slighting him in some way, and this fuels his growing anger and hatred for Budd. Claggart determines to destroy Budd. He engages the aid of his underlings, particularly Squeak, to humiliate and persecute Budd.

One night a sailor awakens Budd and summons him to a meeting in an isolated part of the ship. The innocent Budd goes to the appointed meeting place where a man he does not know offers him two guineas if he will "cooperate" on something. Budd does not understand what the man wants or why he's offering the money. Yet Budd is astute enough to realize something about the meeting, the man, and the money is not right. Budd stutters as he threatens to strike the mysterious man if he does not go away and leave him alone. Budd returns

to his sleeping area where two fellow sailors question him about what happened. Uncharacteristically, Budd says simply the sailor he met was confused and lost in a remote part of the ship.

Claggart's persecution of Budd has not satisfied him or slaked his hatred. He approaches Captain Vere to report there is a rumor that Budd is organizing a mutiny on board. Vere is alarmed and calls Budd to his cabin. He has Claggart repeat his accusation in front of Budd. Budd is so shocked by Claggart's blatant lie he cannot speak. In the face of this outrageous accusation Budd's stutter has left him completely mute. Yet Vere prompts Budd to give his side of the story, to defend himself. Captain Vere tries to calm Budd to lessen his stutter and allow him to explain and defend himself. But Budd cannot talk. In his frustration and outrage at Claggart's false allegation, Budd reacts in the only way he can under the circumstances. He lashes out with his arm and punches Claggart powerfully on the forehead. Claggart collapses, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound. When Captain Vere is unable to rouse Claggart he sends Budd to an adjoining stateroom. Then Vere calls the surgeon who pronounces Claggart dead.

The Killing Defense

Killing a senior officer is a capital offense on board ship. Captain Vere arranges for petty officers to sit in a hastily convened drumhead court to judge Budd. Vere is the sole witness to the crime, and he describes to the court what happened. Budd is summoned and somehow is able to utter a few words in his defense. He admits he hit Claggart but claims he did not intend to hurt or kill him. He maintains his intention was "innocent." He also asserts he in no way is involved in a mutiny. The officers send Budd back to the stateroom while they deliberate.

In a key scene in the book Vere speaks to the court to convince the officers to convict and quickly sentence Budd to death for his crime of murder. Vere argues their feelings about Budd and his innate innocence must be ignored so they can do their duty to the law and find him guilty. They must override whatever their conscience and their morality tell them in this case. They must convict and do so immediately. The court acquiesces to Vere's argument and finds Budd guilty of murder. They agree he is to be hanged the next morning.

Vere goes into the stateroom and tells Budd of his fate. What is said between them is not reported. That night Captain Vere tells the assembled sailors what happened and that they must witness Budd's hanging the next morning. The captain takes precautions to prevent the shocked and potentially angry sailors from protesting the pending execution.

Budd spends the night chained on deck. The ship's chaplain comes to counsel Budd and ready him for his death. The chaplain is nonplussed when he finds Budd is fully reconciled to his impending death. Budd is at peace with dying and does not fear it. The chaplain realizes he has nothing to teach Budd, so he just kisses his cheek as he leaves him.

Execution

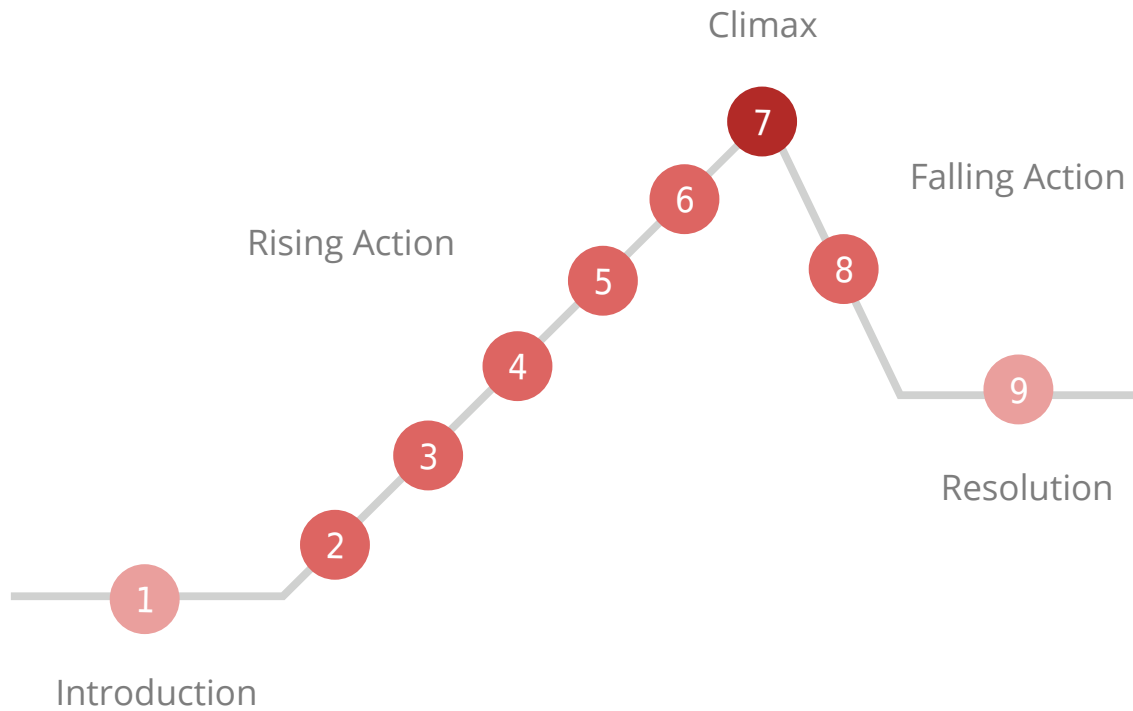
At four the next morning Budd is hanged from a spar on the ship. Budd's last words just before he dies are "God bless Captain Vere!" Budd hangs calmly and without moving. The assembled sailors pick up and repeat Budd's last words. As Budd calmly dies, a beautiful dawn breaks over the ship.

Many sailors are upset by Budd's execution, but they are put to work to prevent them from organizing any kind of protest. On board the daily routine is reinstated. Yet some sailors secretly talk about Budd's strangely calm death and what it may mean.

Later the *Bellipotent* engages in battle with a French vessel, the *Athée* (the Atheist), and defeats the French. Captain Vere is wounded during the battle and later dies of his wounds. His last words as he's dying in the hospital are "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."

As the story of Budd becomes more widely known it is picked up by a newspaper. The article gets Budd's story completely backward, portraying Budd as a treacherous murderer who killed a blameless master-at-arms. British sailors, however, come to venerate Budd and keep his legend alive. The spar from which he was hanged becomes for them a kind of holy relic, and they sing songs to celebrate Billy Budd.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Billy Budd is impressed onto the *Bellipotent*.

Rising Action

2. Budd spills his soup near John Claggart, who begins to hate him.
3. Claggart's assistants persecute Budd.
4. Budd is secretly offered money to join a mutiny; he refuses.
5. Claggart tells Captain Vere Budd is organizing a mutiny.
6. Vere asks Budd to defend himself; his stutter silences him.

Climax

7. Confused and mute, Budd strikes Claggart, killing him.

Falling Action

8. Vere convinces the court to condemn Budd to die.

Resolution

9. Budd is hanged; he's then venerated by the sailors.

Timeline of Events

Soon after

John Claggart develops a consuming hatred and envy of Budd.

Soon after

Budd tells Dansker of his fear of flogging; Dansker tells Budd Claggart is out to get him.

The same day

Claggart views this incident as antipathy for him; his hatred of Budd intensifies.

Several days later

Budd is awoken and offered money to support a mutiny. He refuses.

Sometime later

The *Bellipotent* is ordered far from the fleet but fails to

Late summer of 1787

Billy Budd is impressed from the *Rights-of-Man* to the British warship *Bellipotent*.

Soon after

Budd is greatly upset after witnessing a flogging onboard the ship.

The next day

Budd spills his soup, which flows near Claggart's feet.

Soon after

Claggart hatches a plot, carried out by his corporals, to destroy Budd.

Soon after

Budd, confused, asks Dansker for advice and is told it's part of Claggart's evil plot.

chase down a French frigate.

Minutes later

Budd is mute and paralyzed by Claggart's accusation. He strikes Claggart, who dies.

The next morning

Budd is hanged from the spar, crying "God bless Captain Vere!" as he dies.

A few days later

Claggart tells Captain Vere of his suspicion that Budd is plotting a mutiny.

Later that day

At Budd's trial Vere convinces the court officers to convict and condemn Budd to death.

Sometime later

Vere is injured in battle. His dying words are "Billy Budd."

Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1–2

Summary

Chapter 1

The book opens with the narrator introducing the concept of the Handsome Sailor and his popularity among his fellow seamen. The Handsome Sailor is beautiful but not "vainglorious." The narrator remembers a beautiful African sailor he once saw on the dock in Liverpool, England. He was the embodiment of the Handsome Sailor—beautiful, jovial, and "the center of a company of his shipmates." Like all Handsome Sailors, he had strength and beauty but was not a "dandy" and a show-off. The narrator further explains the Handsome Sailor had a moral nature that mirrored his physical beauty.

The narrator states that Billy Budd—the object of his story—is an exemplar of the Handsome Sailor. Budd, aged 21, is a foretopman on a British merchant vessel. Lieutenant Ratcliffe of the British navy boards the merchant ship, called the *Rights-of-Man*, to impress merchant seamen into service in the British navy. When Ratcliffe sees Billy Budd, he determines that Budd will be the only sailor he will take with him to the warship *Bellipotent*. Captain Graveling of the *Rights-of-Man* is unhappy about losing Budd, who goes down to the forecabin to pack his bag. He is so upset he ignores naval tradition and fails to offer Ratcliffe the hospitality of a drink. It was Graveling's duty to hand over Budd, but doing so was "a dry obligation" done with regret. Graveling tells Ratcliffe he's taking "my best man ... the jewel of 'em," and Ratcliffe replies, "I know." Graveling tells Ratcliffe how Budd's good nature improved the functioning of the ship and brought peaceful cooperation among the sailors, "sugaring the sour ones." He reports that all the sailors "love him," and his departure will likely bring renewed discord to the merchant ship.

Budd has come up on deck with his bag of personal belongings. As Lieutenant Ratcliffe boards his small boat to take Budd to the warship, instead of slowly and grudgingly climbing aboard, Budd jumps from the bow of the *Rights-of-*

Man into the waiting boat. Boarding a boat that way is "a terrible breach of naval decorum," but Ratcliffe does not reproach him. Budd then bids goodbye to the sailors and to Captain Graveling. Budd seems to take his impressment in stride and with equanimity.

Aboard the *Bellipotent* Billy Budd is deemed a fit sailor and assigned to be a foretopman. He quickly learns his job and carries it out in "a genial, happy-go-lucky" way. Budd's good nature quickly makes him a favorite among the sailors on the warship.

Chapter 2

Billy Budd is a "novice," having never served on a warship before. But his lack of "conceit or vanity" made other sailors eager to teach him his task, and he willingly accepted their guidance. He was guileless and did not notice when a few others gave him an "ambiguous smile" or when the ship's officers regarded him favorably. He always had "a humane look of reposeful good-nature" and even showed the grace and love the narrator associates with "a mother."

When Budd is officially questioned about himself he tells the officer he doesn't know where he was born or who his father is—that he knows nothing about his beginnings as he was a foundling. Yet his nature and bearing suggest that he was of "noble descent" even though he was an orphan. Although Budd cannot read he is likened to an "illiterate nightingale" who "could not read but ... could sing." The narrator goes on to describe Billy Budd's purity and reflect on it in terms of "civilization."

Billy Budd has one defect: he stutters. When he is "provoked" his strong feelings mute his otherwise "musical voice," and he cannot speak or he speaks with a severe stammer. Budd's muteness in the face of provocation is described as "an organic hesitancy" created seemingly by some evil "interferer."

The narrator states Budd's "imperfection" is a clue his story is not a "romance" but something far darker.

Analysis

The novel opens with the motif of the Handsome Sailor, a figure who is physically beautiful but lacking in vanity and of a mild temperament and genial disposition. The Handsome Sailor

(now "extinct" the narrator says) is known not only for his physical beauty but also for his "prowess," honesty, and impeccable "moral nature."

The story of the African sailor serves as an introduction to Billy Budd, who is also the embodiment of the Handsome Sailor. Captain Graveling, the commander of his ship, *Rights-of-Man*, is sorry to lose Budd to naval impressment. Budd's good nature and aversion to conflict made him the "peacemaker" on the merchant vessel. Unlike most sailors facing impressment Budd accepts Lieutenant Ratcliffe's order with "uncomplaining acquiescence" and goes immediately to pack his belongings.

The theme of duty and loyalty is briefly introduced when Captain Graveling is upset at losing Billy Budd to the British navy. Yet "his duty he always faithfully did" even when he did not like it. As he prepares to leave the merchant vessel Ratcliffe tells Graveling the king will be "delighted to learn that one shipmaster at least cheerfully surrenders to the King the flower of his flock." Ratcliffe suggests the king will compensate Graveling for acquiescing to the impressment of his best sailor. Graveling's loyalty to the king is shown by his willingness to do his duty, and this will be noted and rewarded. Ratcliffe is similarly impressed by Budd's compliance, which he attributes to his loyalty to the king. However, Ratcliffe is likely mistaken. Budd's ready acquiescence is certainly more an expression of his gentle nature than it is of his loyalty.

The theme of morality is touched on briefly. Budd is said to have a "moral nature" that is as pure and beautiful as his physical being. The purity of his morality will be contrasted with that of others later in the book.

Animal imagery illuminates Budd's true plight. Budd's acceptance of his impressment compares him to a goldfinch put into a cage. In the matter of impressment any protest, or "demur," Budd might have made would have been as pointless as the protests of that goldfinch. Like the goldfinch, a wild bird, Budd is snared in society's system of manning its military. He has no agency and is powerless.

Names are symbols in these opening chapters. The *Rights-of-Man* is a merchant ship whose name is taken from the book by Thomas Paine. In his book Paine argues all men should be free, should have rights, and should live in a democratic society. The name of the merchant vessel contrasts sharply with the name of the warship Budd is taken to. The name *Bellipotent* means "the power of war." That the British carry out naval wars by impressing free men into military service is diametrically

opposed to the ideas of Thomas Paine. Even the name *Budd* may be symbolic of Budd's potential opening up to a full flowering of ultimate purity and spirit. Perhaps it signifies his full realization of his true nature when he dies.

Biblical references are a motif used in these opening chapters. In blithely referring to Budd, Ratcliffe quotes the Bible, saying, "blessed are the peacemakers." This may be a foreshadowing of later events in the story. It may refer to Budd's achieving absolute blessedness when he dies, or it may refer to his blessing of Captain Vere just before he is hanged. Budd's character is described in both biblical and animal terms. He is said to lack "the wisdom of the serpent" (as in the serpent in the Garden of Eden) but is not "quite a dove" (a biblical symbol of peace). Further, when asked about who his father is, he answers "God knows." This may just be common usage, but it might also underline Budd's divine nature. Throughout the novel Billy Budd is referred to in terms that seem to make him into a Christ-like figure. In Chapter 2 Budd's purity is compared with that of Adam before the Fall—before he'd been enticed to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Because he lacked worldly knowledge Adam in the Garden was the purest of pure beings. Comparing Budd to Adam implies Budd was totally pure and without sin.

The symbol of knowledge represents civilization. Although the narrator has always described Budd as beautiful and pure—as pure as Adam before the Fall—the fact that Budd is illiterate makes him "in many respects ... little more than a sort of upright barbarian." Here knowledge is the symbolic keystone of civilization. It is almost shocking that Budd would be described this way because he is illiterate. Those without knowledge or education—those of the lower classes—are seen as subhuman. Even the Christ-like Billy Budd is demeaned by his "betters" for not having the worldly knowledge an upper-class education provides.

Budd's stammer seems to represent an imperfection in his otherwise perfect being. In describing Budd's stammer, the narrator uses a biblical reference. He implies it was an imperfection imposed on Budd by Satan, the "arch-interferer ... the envious marplot of Eden." Budd's stammer may be a symbol of a flaw that makes Budd more human and less divine. Yet Budd stutters when he is confronted by an evil and outrageous provocation. As will be seen later in the story, Budd's stammer may arise from his inability to comprehend the evil in ordinary mortals. He is mute when confronted by evil because he is too pure to communicate with it and reveal his

true feelings about it.

Billy Budd is an innocent. But his innocence may not be perfect. A flaw in Budd's character is revealed as a defect in his innocence and in his role as peacemaker. In a paragraph that foreshadows pivotal events to come, Graveling describes how Budd reacted to an "insulting" nudge in the ribs by Red Whiskers, a sailor who was teaching Budd how to do something. "Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm," striking Red Whiskers and giving him a "terrible drubbing." Graveling says Red Whiskers envied Budd and Budd knew of no way to respond to the insult except by lashing out. However, Budd "never meant to do [harm]," and later Red Whiskers comes to "really love Billy." The incident later in the book will not have such a happy ending. Budd's leaping into Ratcliffe's boat—a "terrible" breach of naval rules—also foreshadows events to come.

When Billy Budd leaves the merchant ship he calls out, "And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man!*" This statement introduces the theme of justice because Budd is literally leaving behind his rights as an individual in society and under the law when he is taken from the merchant vessel. Budd's words also foreshadow events to come, which are set in motion by a social order that sacrifices human rights to the power of the law, and thus deforms justice.

Chapters 3–5

Summary

Chapter 3

This chapter describes the mutinies that began among sailors on British naval vessels. In April of that year sailors in Spithead, England, created a "commotion" or action in protest of their treatment on board ship. In May the Nore mutiny, also called "the Great Mutiny," occurred. The narrator describes it as highly "menacing" to England, like a "strike in the fire-brigade would be to London threatened by general arson." It was, the narrator says, "an unbounded revolt." Yet the narrator explains the mutiny is little known because the British did not want to broadcast information about such widespread discontent.

The Spithead mutiny was put down after the British made

"concessions" to the leaders of the revolt, especially regarding "glaring abuses" in the treatment of sailors. The Nore mutiny was an "insurrection" on a larger scale the authorities had to counter more "aggressively." The narrator goes on to say that after the Nore mutiny was finally put down, some of the sailors involved in it went on to fight for king and country at the battles of the Nile and at Trafalgar. Both were acclaimed British victories over the French and are viewed by the British as "unmatched in human annals" of naval prowess.

Chapter 4

The narrator devotes this chapter to a digression about the advances in maritime warfare and the qualities that make a great naval commander. He first describes the earliest inventions in warfare, such as gunpowder and swords, and the "gallant" knights who used these weapons. He then compares the rather decrepit ship, the *Victory*, used by Admiral Nelson in his earlier sea battles, to the *Monitors* and the even newer ironclad ships of his time.

From here the narrator moves on to argue that the star embedded in Admiral Nelson's ship, the *Victory*, marking the spot where he died, is a warranted tribute to the man. He disagrees with those who aver that Nelson should have retreated from the battle at Trafalgar and thus saved himself and his ship, which was shipwrecked. Rather the narrator insists that "personal prudence" is not the foremost quality of a great ship's captain. Instead the most important "special virtue" a commander can have is "love of glory ... [that impels] an honest heart-felt sense of duty." This is the quality that Nelson possessed and is why he is so honored—even above Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo (1815). Nelson, he states, transformed his sense of his own greatness into "shining deeds." And this transformation is to be celebrated.

Chapter 5

The narrator says that although the Nore mutiny was put down, some of the sailors' major grievances were not redressed. Although the material things provided to the sailors were somewhat improved, the major complaint surrounding impressment was not addressed. The British navy relied heavily on impressment to man its ships, so that practice was not ended.

The continuation of impressment left a lingering discontent among sailors. For this reason, ships' commanders were always wary of a resurgence of revolt. And some "sporadic" uprisings did occur. The narrator describes how Rear Admiral Nelson was charged with subduing a real threat of mutiny among sailors on a ship that had been involved in the Nore mutiny.

The reality was that new mutinies simmered just under the surface aboard any naval vessel. This led to justifiable anxiety—even paranoia—among ships' commanders. To prevent a recurrence of mutiny when a ship was at sea more intense "vigilance" was used both to detect any sign of discontent and to prevent the sailors from plotting a revolt.

Analysis

The motif of mutiny dominates these chapters. In Chapter 3 the narrator references the Spithead and Nore mutinies. The Spithead mutiny began in April 1797 among sailors on ships docked at Spithead near the southern English city of Portsmouth. The mutiny ended via negotiation, and British navy granted most of their demands. These included improvements in food and other provisions, an increase in sailor's pay after 100 years of static wages, better medical treatment, and less flogging as a punishment for even minor rule infractions. Fifty-nine of the most vicious ship commanders were relieved of their duty. Only the demand to stop impressment was not granted. All sailors who took part in the Spithead mutiny were officially pardoned by the Royal Navy.

The Nore mutiny was larger and harder for the navy to contain. It began at the Nore anchorage in the estuary of the Thames River in May 1797. The demands of the Nore mutineers went way beyond those at Spithead. Leaders of the Nore mutiny not only demanded better living and working conditions but also wanted assurances they would be pardoned. They even went so far as to demand that the king dissolve Parliament and sign a peace treaty with France. These last two demands outraged the navy and of course were not conceded. In response the mutineers set up a blockade on the River Thames in an attempt to prevent ships from entering or leaving London. The mutineers were not entirely successful, so some river trade continued. Some mutineers wanted to sail the ships they occupied to France to join the revolution, but this plan backfired because it alienated many mutinous sailors who were still loyal to England. Eventually the Royal Navy refused

to allow food to be brought on board the mutineers' ships and the mutiny ended. There were no pardons for the leaders of the Nore mutiny. Some were hanged, while others were flogged, sent to prison, or transported to Australia.

The anxiety and paranoia arising from these mutinies was fueled by the very real fear the British had of the violent revolution underway in France. The French Revolution's call for "liberty, fraternity, and equality" undermined the class-ridden authoritarianism of Britain and especially the navy. The Nore mutineers' plans to sail to France reinforced British fears that the French Revolution might be imported to Britain.

The digression about the mutinies sheds light on what might be deemed Captain Vere's overreaction to the charges made against Billy Budd. To prevent a mutiny on his ship, Vere had to be extremely "vigilant" regarding his sailors' behavior and attitudes. The reader is told that "danger was apprehended from the temper of the men," so Vere's reaction to the accusation made against Budd might arise from a misapprehension of Budd's temper—yet one arising from Vere's understandable paranoia about a mutiny that could arise "at short notice."

When the narrator praises Admiral Nelson for channeling his self-regard into "shining deeds," he may in a way be praising Captain Vere's decisive action in the case of Billy Budd later in the story. The narrator also states that "prudence" is a less important quality for a ship's commander than decisive action, perhaps akin to the action taken by Captain Vere against Billy Budd. It's possible that the narrator sees Vere as heroic in his own way as Nelson was in his.

The theme of loyalty is also important here. The Nore mutiny failed in part because a fairly large number of mutineers remained loyal to king and country. They opposed sailing their ships to France to join the revolution there. Not only were these mutineers loyal to England, they were proud of its great naval victories. Pride turned them against the mutiny and back toward doing their duty to their country.

Captain Vere's sense of duty and his loyalty to the British navy were also enflamed by the threat of mutiny. The Royal Navy tried to keep news of the mutinies out of public view. Vere was likely loyal to the reputation of the navy and wanted to prevent another mutiny (on his ship) from further sullyng that reputation. He felt he was doing his duty by being overly paranoid about the possibility of mutiny aboard the *Bellipotent*. It is implied Vere's later actions toward Billy Budd were spurred

by his commitment to duty and loyalty.

Chapters 6–10

Summary

Chapter 6

At the beginning of this chapter the narrator introduces Captain Edward Vere, the commander of the *Bellipotent*. He is "a sailor of distinction" and a "renowned seaman." He is said to be fair aboard ship but is described as having a "grave" bearing, with "little appreciation of mere humor." He is "unobtrusive" in his demeanor though "resolute" in his nature.

The captain's naval nickname is "Starry Vere" due to his habit of standing alone on deck and "absently gaz[ing] off at the black sea." The name may have derived from his "kinsman," Lord Denton, who toasted Vere's successful maritime campaigns in the West Indies with the words "Give ye joy, Ed ... my starry Vere!" The word *starry* also comes from a poem by Andrew Marvell. In any case the nickname seemed appropriate and it stuck.

Chapter 7

This chapter describes Captain Vere in more detail. The narrator says Vere is "exceptional" and an "intellectual" who loved to read books. He favors histories and biographies, as well as philosophy. He prefers accounts of true events and real people. He chooses his reading to confirm his conservative views, which he feels will remain unaltered throughout his life. He therefore opposes innovations because he thinks they are inimical to established social institutions and a danger to "the peace of mankind."

His bookishness makes Vere seem "dry" and "lacking in the companionable quality." His peers find him to be a "noble" but rather odd person. The narrator confesses Vere never engaged in "jocosely familiar" conversation with others. His discourse consists mainly of allusions to classical figures or history, and he seems unaware his erudite comments bewilder others.

Chapter 8

The reader meets John Claggart in this chapter. Claggart is the ship's master-at-arms, or chief of police, who keeps an eye on the behavior of the sailors. Claggart is about 35 years old at the time of the story and is said to be "of no ill figure upon the whole." His face has good features except for his chin, which has a "protuberant heaviness" in its shape. His skin is described as having the pallor of "time-tinted marbles" indicative of his not working out in the sun. His dark hair covers a head that shows "more than average" intelligence.

Claggart's appearance gives him the look of an educated man of quality, which the narrator says was "incongruous" with his function on the ship. His personal history is a mystery to the sailors on board. Yet that doesn't stop the men from concocting elaborate rumors about Claggart's early and adult life. Sailors whisper of some sinister or criminal behavior in Claggart's past, but nothing can be verified. As an officer of the ship, Claggart is not "popular with the crew."

The narrator goes on to support this gossip, in a sense, by describing how police on shore were encouraged to nab anyone at hand as a suspect in any crime and then deliver him immediately to a waiting warship. This is another way the British navy filled its ranks. In other cases men who had committed crimes, who were bankrupt, or had other unsavory problems sometimes enlisted in the navy to escape their entanglements. For them the Royal Navy was a "sanctuary." The narrator goes on to tell a tale he heard from a man 40 years previously about a warship that "culled [its sailors] direct from the jails."

Claggart entered the navy without prior naval experience and at first was given a lowly job. But his intelligence was soon recognized, and he was promoted to master-at-arms. As such he has "corporals" or subordinates who do his bidding and are additional eyes and ears for him in overseeing the seamen. These underlings comprise an "underground" network of spies who, under Claggart's control and at his direction, can ensure the "mysterious discomfort" of any sailor aboard.

Chapter 9

Billy Budd enjoys his work as a foretopman, and he gets along well with his fellow sailors. He is "well content" and gives no "offense to anybody." He is always so eager to help out on a

job when called upon his fellow topmen "sometimes good-naturedly laughed at him."

His eagerness to help out when asked is prompted not only by his mild disposition but also by a "formal gangway-punishment" he witnesses soon after coming aboard the warship. A young sailor had been absent from his post when the ship was put out to sea, and this was considered a severe transgression. The young man is punished by being flogged across his bare back as the assembled sailors look on. Budd is "horrified" and resolves never to shirk his duty and risk being punished himself. Yet life on board ship sometimes leads Budd to commit minor infractions, such as the wrong placement of his bag of belongings or other petty misdeeds. However petty they seem these minor errors earn Budd a degree of anger, even threat, from other sailors. Budd cannot understand how such small mistakes lead to potential danger. His lack of understanding "vexe[s] him."

Budd takes his bewilderment to Dansker (the Dane), a wizened old sailor who is wise in the ways of the navy and the world. The narrator states at first Dansker looked on Budd as an example of the Handsome Sailor, but he later regarded him quizzically, wondering how the inexperienced young man would fare on board the warship. In any case Dansker likes Budd and Budd "revere[s]" him. Budd asks Dansker why he sometimes gets into trouble. Dansker says, "Baby Budd, *Jemmy Legs* [meaning the master-at-arms] is down on you." Budd is confused, insisting Claggart always has "a pleasant word" for him. Dansker explains "that's because he's down upon you, Baby Budd." Budd is disturbed and uncomprehending as he leaves the wise but cynical Dansker.

Chapter 10

The next day Budd begins to disbelieve what Dansker told him. Budd is eating dinner while the ship is rolling in a strong wind. When the ship lurches Budd's soup spills out of his bowl. The soup flows across the deck and right to the feet of the passing Claggart. Claggart steps over the mess and says nothing until he sees that it is Budd who has spilled his soup. For an instant Claggart's face clouds over, but then he seems to smile and says, "Handsomely done, my lad!" As he moves on Claggart's expression changes to reveal a kind of scowl or "grimace." Other sailors who heard and saw the incident laugh "with counterfeited glee" to please the master-at-arms. Budd joins in, reassured Claggart bears him no ill will. He does not see

Claggart's expression turn hostile, "usurping the face from the heart" as he walks away from the sailors.

Analysis

The themes of duty and justice converge in Captain Vere, who is described as an extremely conservative and sober man devoted to duty and the higher intellectual pursuits. The narrator notes he is "never injudicious," which implies a devotion to justice, something that later will seem dubious. He is "grave" and "resolute," an "undemonstrative" or unemotional man who prefers concrete history in his reading over imaginative novels. His lack of imagination and emotion will be seen to inform his judgment later in the book.

The symbol of knowledge as the mark of civilization is exemplified in Vere. Vere is clearly highly educated and therefore highly "civilized." He cannot engage in easy conversation with others because he is locked in his civilizing knowledge while his companions, who don't understand him, are clearly less knowledgeable (and therefore less civilized). That occasionally Vere gazes "absently" out at sea and at the sky is the only hint the reader has that Vere may have an inner life beyond pure intellect. Yet Vere's absolute loyalty to conservative, unchanging values as the foundation of civilization tells the reader he is rigid in interpreting and carrying out his duty (and the law). Vere is convinced that without "lasting institutions" the welfare of mankind, or civilization as Vere understands it, is at grave risk. The law is a foundational institution that Vere is determined to uphold, regardless of circumstances.

The association of knowledge with civilization is turned on its head when the narrator describes the sailors' assessment of Claggart. The narrator describes the sailors as having "conceptions of human wickedness [that] were necessarily of the narrowest, limited to ideas of vulgar rascality." The ordinary sailors and their negative (but valid) judgment of Claggart are disparaged because they are lower class and uncultivated, or uncivilized. Yet as will be seen later in the book, the sailors' judgment of Claggart's character is spot on. It will be the learned and ultracivilized Captain Vere who will misjudge the man.

The introduction of Claggart intensifies the theme of innocence and malice. Although he is not described as an out-and-out villain, Claggart's mysterious past hints at some sort of

evil doing. The narrator reinforces the evil in Claggart by recounting how sailors were impressed from jails directly onto ships, or how criminals enlisted to avoid the consequences of their misdeeds. The narrator does not say so directly, but by moving directly from a description of Claggart to a discussion of criminal sailors, he makes the inference clear.

Claggart's malice is obvious when the narrator describes his "underground influence" that he operated "to the mysterious discomfort, if nothing worse, of any of the sea-commonality." Claggart has created a network of spies and goons who follow his instructions to "discomfort" any of the ship's crew Claggart targets. They are the agents of his malice.

The theme of innocence and malice reemerges when Budd seeks out Dansker for advice. In his innocence Budd cannot understand how he can have been admonished for extremely petty mistakes. Yet he is so worried about flouting even the tiniest rule Budd turns to the wise Dansker. Dansker is a master at recognizing hypocrisy and malicious conspiracy in others. He tells Budd of Claggart's enmity, but Budd is too innocent to believe it. Dansker is, in a way, intermediate between the malice of Claggart and the innocence of Budd. Dansker's wisdom is so hardened by harsh experience of men and the world he is ruled by cynicism. He may fear for Billy Budd but is said to be more "speculative" about the fate of such an innocent, because innocence "does yet in a moral emergency not always sharpen the faculties or enlighten the will." Dansker clearly sees Budd's innocence and the danger he is in from Claggart's malice. But Dansker's cynicism prevents him from protecting Budd. He will wait and see if, in the face of Claggart's malice, Budd develops the ability to fight back or defend himself. Yet in his innocence Budd finds Dansker's warning "incomprehensible," which only reinforces the older man's grim view of what is likely to come.

The incident of the spilled soup seems to buttress Dansker's conclusion that Budd's innocence is no match for Claggart's hostility. Budd cannot discern the malice lurking behind Claggart's seemingly pleasant words. He thinks Claggart's reaction to the spilled soup disproves Dansker's warning about Claggart being "down on him." But the narrator reveals the scowl that contorts Claggart's face as he walks away from Budd. Although the other sailors who witnessed the incident laugh at it, the narrator describes their reaction as "counterfeited glee," as if they are aware of Claggart's malicious nature despite his light-hearted words.

The theme of truth, rumor, and falsehood comes into play with the character of Claggart. The sailors know nothing of Claggart's past or his experience, but that does not stop them from conjuring up what may be fantastic rumors about what they imagine his history to be. The rumors become so widespread as to take on the aspect of truth. Even the narrator seems infected by the rumors. He says that the "dearth of exact knowledge" about Claggart still "opened to the invidious a vague field for unfavorable surmise." Then instead of giving a reasonable critique of the rumors, the narrator reinforces them with his discussion of criminals who become sailors to find "refuge" in the navy. The narrator is ambivalent about the rumors, stating "it would not perhaps be easy ... directly to prove or disprove the allegation[s]" about criminal sailors, but the same ambivalence applies to his seeming acceptance of the rumors about Claggart.

Both Budd's conversation with Dansker and Claggart's response to the spilled soup underscore the theme of truthfulness and falsehood. Budd cannot comprehend that sweetly spoken words can be a cover for falsehood. His innocence makes Budd take such things at face value. He cannot interpret the malice behind the spoken words. The same thing happens when Claggart speaks good-naturedly about the spilled soup. Budd takes Claggart's words as proof that Claggart has no evil intentions toward him. Of course, falsehoods lie beneath the words spoken in both incidents. The innocent Budd just can't see or comprehend them.

The law and justice are made visible when the young sailor is flogged in front of the assembled crew. Billy Budd, the innocent, is said to be "horrified" by the cruel punishment—and by extension what passes for justice before the law on the high seas.

Chapters 11–13

Summary

Chapter 11

This chapter opens with the question, "What was the matter with the master-at-arms?" The narrator goes on to contemplate what it is in Claggart that makes him hate the

innocent and inoffensive Billy Budd so intensely. Although he can elucidate no reason for the animosity, the narrator concludes that "down on [Budd], he assuredly was."

The narrator speculates perhaps Claggart had known Budd in the past and still held a grudge against him for a long-past incident. But then the narrator states Claggart had not known Budd before. The narrator comes to the conclusion that it was precisely Budd's "harmlessness" that elicited "an antipathy spontaneous and profound" in Claggart. The sailors on a warship are of "dissimilar personalities," and all these diverse characters must somehow learn to live together in some type of harmony—or at least to accept their differences. Yet Claggart is an "exceptional mortal" who cannot abide a sailor who is the "direct reverse of a saint." Claggart's character is so warped he has passed "a deadly space" to have become so consumed with malice.

The narrator goes on to relate a conversation he once had with an older man about how one understands unusual men. He wonders if "knowledge of the world" allows a normal man to understand an exceptional one. The older man states that would give one only a "superficial" understanding of the unusual man. He avers that "to know the world and to know human nature" are two distinct things, and one does not give insight into the other.

Then the narrator explains what some philosophers have said about men like Claggart. He cites Plato's definition of "natural depravity" as being of nature and Calvin's idea that men are born sinful. True depravity, the narrator insists, is not brutish but more likely to display a kind of "intellectuality," even "the mantle of respectability." Yet while such a depraved man may seem reasonable in his mind, his heart has "little to do with reason" except insofar as it can further his malicious plots. Claggart is such a man, one whose depravity is innate and secret and who pursues evil with the outer aspect of sanity.

Chapter 12

Claggart is described as "well molded" with a normal appearance. He is also said to be neat and "careful in his dress." Billy Budd looks different because he has the "heroic" look of one "lit ... from within." What everyone, including Claggart, sees in Budd is pure spirituality, love, and even saintliness. The narrator suggests it was Budd's unique beauty that inflamed Claggart's hatred of him.

Envy and antipathy are discussed as being "irreconcilable" though "conjoined." The narrator describes envy as (nearly) universal among people even though they are deeply ashamed of feeling it. Claggart's envy goes beyond that felt by ordinary people. Claggart's envy is "deeper" because he truly understands the "ineffability" of the "moral phenomenon" that was Billy Budd's spirituality and innocence.

Claggart is powerless to not act on his "elemental evil." He can hide his malice but is impelled to act on it.

Chapter 13

Claggart's passionate hatred will be acted out on the stage of the deck of the *Bellipotent*. The narrator speculates when Claggart saw Budd's spilled soup trickling toward him he did not dismiss it as a mere accident. Instead when he saw that it was Budd's soup there arose in him a "spontaneous feeling" of "antipathy." The narrator tells the reader Claggart probably thought the spilled soup was some type of "sly escape of ... feeling" on Budd's part akin to Claggart's malicious intentions. Claggart's interpretation of Budd's "sly" action awakes in him a contempt for Budd that amplified his hatred.

Claggart's contempt has been reinforced by his snitch (or corporal), Squeak. Squeak has reported to his boss he suspects there's a "rat" down among the sailors. Claggart immediately conflates Squeak's suspicions of mutiny with his newfound contempt and hatred for Budd. It seems Claggart has instructed Squeak to observe Budd and to set traps for him that might reveal a tidbit of information Claggart could use to destroy Budd.

Squeak has done what his master commanded, even to the extent of fabricating reports of Budd's iniquity. Squeak has made it his business "to ferment the ill blood by perverting to his chief certain innocent frolics of the good-natured foretopman." He has also made up reports against Budd out of whole cloth. Claggart "never suspected the veracity of these reports" because he knew how unpopular he was among the sailors. He accepts Squeak's false reports to satisfy his "greediness of hate" for Budd. If he can't get more solid proof of Budd's mutinous intent, Claggart is as glad to act "upon surmise as upon certainty." The narrator suggests the spilling of the soup combined with Squeak's false reports are enough evidence for Claggart to make a case against Budd. Having previously had no "evidence" against Budd other than Squeak's

fabrications, Claggart uses the spilling of the soup as a welcome "self-justification" for destroying Budd.

Analysis

The exclusive focus of these chapters is on the theme of innocence and malice. Claggart is the key character explored here. A person with a "normal nature" cannot understand him. Claggart has crossed "the deadly space between" normality and the "insanity" of all-consuming evil. His evil is "not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate." However, he keeps it hidden behind what seems like normal, ordinary appearance and behavior.

In a reference to the Bible, the narrator calls Claggart's form of evil the "mystery of iniquity" because it can't be traced back to any definitive cause. It is an evil born in him, but why he was born with it is a mystery. The biblical reference to the Pharisee refers to Claggart's desire to use the letter of the law to destroy Billy Budd. (See the Context section for explanation of Guy Fawkes.)

Claggart's malice is activated by Billy Budd's innocence. When speculating on the origin of Claggart's boundless animosity toward Budd, the narrator describes the mysteriousness of "antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals" merely by the "aspect of some other mortal, however harmless he may be," speculating that the "harmlessness itself" is what calls forth the antipathy.

Envy is named as an important impetus to Claggart's malice toward Budd. "If askance [Claggart] eyed the good looks ... and frank enjoyment of young life in Billy Budd," the narrator notes, it was because they suggested a nature that "had in its simplicity never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent [envy]." Claggart's malice toward Budd was created from and feeds on his envy of Budd's beauty and goodness. He is the only one on the ship capable of "appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd. And the insight ... intensified his ... disdain of innocence." Of course, the motif of the Handsome Sailor is an important factor here. Claggart recognizes Budd as an exemplar of that perfect, beautiful sailor. And he hates and envies Budd for it.

The symbol of knowledge is used in these chapters to show that its representation of civilization makes it useless for

delving into the evil that dwells inside Claggart. Neither "knowledge of the world" nor "knowledge of human nature" can make Claggart's inner landscape understandable to ordinary people.

Later the symbol of knowledge as civilization is shown to actually promote Claggart's unfathomable malice, which he hides beneath a veneer of sanity: "Civilization, especially if of the austerer sort, is auspicious to [Claggart's all-consuming malice, which] folds itself in the mantle of respectability." Claggart's depravity arises from an apparent "civilized" type of insanity. Such malice "lodge[s] in the heart, not the brain" and so the "intellect" cannot oppose or subdue it.

Several themes, symbols, and motifs come together in Chapter 13. Squeak is motivated by his loyalty to Claggart. Squeak is a loyal vassal who does Claggart's bidding. He seems to relish setting traps for Billy Budd. The theme of truth, rumor, and falsehood is also crucial here. Squeak seeks to earn the approbation of his boss by fabricating lies about Budd. He lies to Claggart by saying he's heard Budd talking to the sailors about treason. Claggart, desperate for more ammunition to use against Budd, believes Squeak's every word. The truth means nothing to Claggart in his pursuit of Budd's destruction. Squeak understands this and makes up vicious lies to feed his master's hatred.

The motif of mutiny is central to Squeak's fabrications. Both Squeak and Claggart know how anxious the ship's officers are about even a whiff of mutiny among the sailors. Squeak is cunning in embedding his lies in threats of mutiny that, he says, are being fomented by Billy Budd. (And, of course, the motif of names pertains to Squeak. Sailors may use this nickname because of the sound of his voice, but for the purposes of the story it's reminiscent of similar contemptible nicknames like "rat" and "squealer"—someone who informs on others to do them harm.)

In seeking to build a "case" against Budd, Claggart makes good use of the "epithets" Squeak recounts to him that purportedly reveal Budd's mutinous inclinations. Claggart adds to these lies his deliberate interpretation of the spilled soup as revealing Budd's "antipathy" toward him. Perhaps Claggart really believes Budd hates him and shows his animosity with spilled soup. Yet this interpretation is contradicted by the earlier statement that Claggart truly recognizes Budd's purity and hates him for that—his inability to do evil. Is the narrator asking the reader to decide which interpretation is correct? Why is

the narrator offering conflicting interpretations of Claggart's deepest thoughts and motivations? Perhaps the narrator, too, is revealing himself as somewhat unreliable in his recounting of the truth and his susceptibility to rumor.

The motif of homoeroticism is implied in Claggart's view of Billy Budd in Chapter 12. Claggart sees "the spirit lodged within Billy ... looking out from his welkin eyes ... that ineffability which made the dimple in his dyed cheek, supplanted his joints, and danced in his yellow curls, made him pre-eminently the Handsome Sailor." Claggart's physical description of Budd definitely shows what might be viewed as an erotic appreciation of the young man. Yet the eroticism is tempered by Claggart's "appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd ... [which] intensified [Claggart's] disdain of [Budd's] innocence." His hatred of Budd's innocence seems to be a passion that far outweighs any physical attraction Claggart may feel.

Chapters 14–16

Summary

Chapter 14

One night Budd is sleeping in his hammock on an upper deck with a group of other sailors. He is suddenly awakened by someone touching his shoulder. The stranger tells Budd to go immediately to the fore-chains because "something [is] in the wind." Then the stranger disappears.

Budd's good nature prevents him from simply saying no to the request, especially as it did not seem openly absurd or hostile. So he got up rather "mechanically" and went to the place mentioned, a "secluded" and "tarry balcony ... overhanging the sea." Soon the stranger approached, but Budd could not identify him on this moonless night. Budd thought he was one of the ship's afterguardsmen. The stranger whispers to Budd, asking if he had been impressed, but Budd says nothing. The afterguardsman then explains there is a whole "gang" of impressed sailors on the ship. He asks Budd if he could "help—at a pinch?"

Budd does not understand and asks what the stranger means. The stranger responds by showing Budd two small, shiny

objects he holds in his open hand. He says, "They are yours, Billy, if you'll only—" Budd becomes rather upset and, as is usual in times of stress, he begins to stammer. Budd manages to tell the stranger he doesn't know what he's talking about and that Budd will "toss [him] back over the r-rail" unless he departs immediately. The afterguardsman sees Budd is serious, so he leaves quickly.

A fellow foretopman, Red Pepper, has heard Budd stuttering and asks him what's going on. Budd says simply that he met an afterguardsman but told him to go away "where he belongs." Red Pepper is angry about the "sneaky" afterguardsman, but Budd's explanation of what happened satisfies him and no more is said about the incident.

Chapter 15

Budd is "sorely puzzled" by this incident, which seemed "underhanded." He wonders if the two objects he saw in the afterguardsman's hand were really guineas (valuable coins). The more he thinks about the incident the more "uneasy" Budd becomes. Although Budd did not really understand what transpired during that nocturnal meeting, he instinctively knows it must have involved "evil of some sort." He decides to try to see the afterguardsman in daylight to get a better idea of his appearance.

Budd sees the afterguardsman the next day smoking a pipe on deck. Budd recognizes him by his build more than his face. For this reason Budd wonders if the man he's looking at is really the person he'd met the night before. The man Budd sees appears "genial" and "free-hearted." Budd begins to question his identity. When the afterguardsman sees Budd looking at him, he nods slightly at Budd in a "familiar sort of friendly" way as if they were "old acquaintances."

A couple of days later the afterguardsman greets Budd as he passes him on deck. Budd is embarrassed by this and does not return the greeting. Budd is still nonplussed by the night incident but decides it's best to say nothing about it to anyone. Yet Budd cannot stop himself from hinting about the incident to Dansker.

Dansker listens to Budd's abbreviated version of the incident and, after thinking for a moment, says, "Didn't I say so, Baby Budd? ... *Jemmy Legs* is *down* on you." Budd is confused because he can't understand what Claggart has to do with the incident. Dansker explains the afterguardsman was a "cat's-

paw." And that is all Dansker will say about the matter.

Chapter 16

Budd rejects Dansker's analysis of who was behind the nighttime incident. Budd cannot believe the man who "always had a pleasant word for him" would do something so underhanded. Budd can't believe Claggart would try to get him in trouble.

Budd is too inexperienced and childlike to recognize the evil in Claggart. Budd has grown up on board ships, so he has known mainly sailors. Budd thinks "the sailor is frankness," not cunning. He believes "life is not a game" for sailors, which makes them more "straightforward" and, in a way, more honest.

The narrator goes on to affirm Budd's judgment about sailors, saying, "as a class, sailors are in character a juvenile race" because sailors are "accustomed to obey orders without debating them." Further, spending a large part of his life on board a ship the sailor has little of that "promiscuous commerce with mankind where unobstructed free agency on equal terms" teaches him to distrust men.

Analysis

The nighttime incident with the afterguardsmen brings up the theme of loyalty and the motif of mutiny. The afterguardsman approaches Budd ostensibly because he's an impressed sailor. It can be surmised, then, that the afterguardsman thinks Budd feels some loyalty to the other impressed sailors on the ship. It is not stated here if Budd feels loyalty to any group. It becomes clear the afterguardsman is trying to engage Budd in a mutiny. Even the innocent Budd senses the "evil" underlying the afterguardsman's proposition. The offer of a bribe, which Budd later correctly identifies as two valuable coins, confirms Budd's feeling something evil is afoot. That is why Budd rejects both it and the man making it.

The symbol of Billy Budd's stammer is used to show Budd recognizes the evil before him and is extremely discomfited by it. Budd's stammer represents his inability to confront evil head on and to speak clearly in opposition to it. Yet here Budd makes his displeasure and rejection of the afterguardsman relatively clear. It is interesting to note Red Pepper approaches

Budd and asks him "What's the matter?" because he just heard Budd stutter. This suggests some sailors have heard Budd stutter in other situations and recognize his stammer as arising from stress.

Knowledge of the world and civilization is presented in the narrator's discussion of the "juvenile" nature of sailors who are trained only to obey orders and who lack experience in judging men and character. For example, Budd finds it hard to match the "free-hearted" appearance of the afterguardsman with the rather sinister sailor who'd awakened and tried to bribe him. The symbol of knowledge as civilization is clarified in the description of how men of the world view other men. Men of the world—civilized men—are keen judges of character. Unlike the more trusting (and less educated and knowledgeable sailors), men of the world instinctively view others with "distrust." This "habitual distrustfulness" is so ingrained in civilized men they are generally "unconscious" of it.

The theme of duty and loyalty arises, but mainly through Budd's ignorance. The narrator states Budd should have known "it was his duty as a loyal blue-jacket to report [the bribery incident to] the proper quarter"—to a ship's officer. The narrator explains that had Budd recognized his duty he would very likely not have carried it out. It's implied Budd feels some loyalty to his fellow sailors because he does not want to be a "telltale" (or tattle-tale) and get a fellow sailor in trouble.

The theme of innocence and malice is again at the forefront in these chapters. The afterguardsman is clearly engaged in some type of evil conspiracy. Dansker understands this particular conspiracy has been planned by Claggart (Jemmy Legs) as part of the plot to destroy Budd. Dansker explains the afterguardsman as a "cat's-paw," or someone who is used by another for the other's (often devious) purpose. The bribe the afterguardsman offers very likely came from Claggart, who also probably paid the afterguardsman for his participation in the plot. It is not clear that the afterguardsman is actually an integral part of Claggart's plan, but he shows his willingness to engage in evil by offering the bribe and trying to entangle Budd in a mutiny. Whether the mutiny is real or not makes no difference. Had Budd taken the bribe he would have revealed his support for the concept of mutiny.

Budd's innocence and "good nature" extend to his inability to say no to the afterguardsman's request for a clandestine meeting. However, his innocence does not blind Budd to the evil he senses in the overtures made by the afterguardsman. In

his innocence Budd continues to deny the evil in Claggart that Dansker keeps trying to convince him of. Claggart's pleasant words and half-smiles convince Budd the master-at-arms feels no malice toward him. Budd is a "child-man" whose "intelligence" of the world remains "simple-minded." Experience cannot break through his innate innocence and teach him the "intuitive knowledge" required to judge others' characters and purposes.

The motif of animal imagery is used vividly to show how Budd reacts in the face of evil. The narrator states Budd recognized there was something evil afoot in the incident because he was like a "young horse fresh from the pasture suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory." The image is one the reader can easily relate to, as it conveys the contrast between nature's sweet air and the toxic, noxious air produced by civilization's foul chemicals. Any person, including Budd, would cringe at the chemical stench (the evil) the way a horse would.

Chapters 17–20

Summary

Chapter 17

Budd notices Claggart seems friendlier to him. But Claggart's looks belie other feelings. Claggart's expression is sad as he watches Budd having a good time in the company of the other sailors. Claggart's sorrow sometimes merges with a look of "yearning," as if he "could even have loved Billy." Yet these fond looks quickly change, revealing a "strange" and "fierce light." Budd sometimes sees these strange looks but is unable to interpret them. Budd's "thews," or sinews, don't enable him to recognize the "malign" in Claggart. Budd knows he's done nothing to earn the master-at-arms's disapproval, so he doesn't worry about Claggart's looks.

Budd barely notices two minor officers who also giving him "peculiar glances." The narrator suggests they were in some way "tampered with," the implication being they were in cahoots with Claggart. Although Budd knows these and other petty officers are Claggart's messmates, Budd does not connect them to Claggart. Budd is unconcerned about these officers' weird looks because he gets along so well with his

fellow sailors. Everything seems to him to be fine.

When Budd passes the afterguardsman on the ship the latter greets Budd cheerfully. Budd thinks this indicates their earlier ominous encounter has been forgotten. The narrator suggests the afterguardsman acts this way because he's totally "baffled" by Budd's "simplicity." The afterguardsman's "crookedness" is disarmed by this simplicity.

Meanwhile Claggart's "monomania," though masked by his normal outward demeanor, becomes a "subterranean fire" consuming him. "Something decisive must come of it," the narrator states.

Chapter 18

For a while nothing of note occurs in Budd's shipboard life.

The narrator then describes Captain Vere's excellence as a commander causes the Royal Navy to order him to sail the *Bellipotent* immediately to another part of the sea. The warship will be far from the rest of the British fleet but near enemy French vessels. The *Bellipotent* finds and chases a French frigate, but it escapes.

After Vere has given up pursuing the French vessel, Claggart approaches him, "cap in hand," on deck. Vere is reflective as he walks the deck alone. Claggart "deferentially" waits for the captain to notice him. The narrator describes how little Captain Vere knows about Claggart. Vere assumes an expression of vague "repellent distaste" when he first sees Claggart and asks him what he wants. (It is unusual for a petty officer to seek an interview with a ship's captain.)

Claggart, with an expression of grief at being "a messenger of ill-tidings," begins to tell Vere why he's come. Claggart reports he had seen something while the warship was chasing the frigate that "convinced" him at least one impressed sailor was involved in a dangerous shipboard conspiracy. Claggart says he has suspected grumbling among the men for a while, but it was only during the pursuit of the French vessel that he observed "the man referred to" engaged in something suspiciously "clandestine." It is, Claggart says, his "deeply felt ... [and] serious responsibility" to report what he saw to the captain—especially in light of the anxiety he knows Vere and other commanders feel after the mutinies earlier that year.

The captain is "disquieted" and "indignant" that a petty officer

would presume to speak of the Nore mutiny to a commander. Yet Vere controls his indignation to hear more of what Claggart has to say. Although Vere is surely mindful of the possibility of mutiny on his ship, he regards Claggart as something like a "perjured witness" in a trial.

Vere demands Claggart name the "one dangerous man" on board. Claggart promptly replies, "William Budd, a foretopman, your honor." The captain shows "unfeigned astonishment" at the naming of the "popular ... Handsome Sailor." Claggart insists that Budd insinuates himself with the sailors in order to turn them toward mutiny. Claggart cites Budd's jumping off the merchant vessel as an expression of anger at his impressment. Vere knows about the incident but has interpreted it as an example of Budd's high spirits, not his resentment. In fact since Budd has been on board his work has been so exemplary Captain Vere has considered promoting him to officer. All these thoughts about Budd cause Vere to seriously question Claggart's allegations.

Vere turns on Claggart, demanding to know why he's come to his commander with such a "foggy" tale. He challenges Claggart to cite one of Budd's actions that confirms the charge against him. He reminds Claggart to "heed what [he] speaks" and not to lie. Claggart reports some of the nefarious things he alleges Budd was overheard saying. He adds "substantiating proof" is not far. Yet Vere is filled with doubts about Claggart and his accusations. Vere is tempted to demand Claggart immediately produce his "substantiation," but he hesitates because doing that would make the accusations known throughout the ship. Vere wants to "test" Claggart before word gets out.

Captain Vere will pursue this matter in a more private place. He determines Budd is not on watch at the time. Vere has his hammock-boy go to fetch Budd and bring him to the captain's cabin where Vere will be able to question both Budd and Claggart in private.

Chapter 19

When Budd finds himself in the cabin with the captain and Claggart he is surprised but not alarmed. In fact Budd thinks the captain has summoned him to promote him.

Vere demands Claggart repeat his accusations in front of Budd so the captain can scrutinize the expressions on both their faces. Claggart moves intimidatingly close to Budd, looks him

in the eye, and repeats his allegations.

At first Budd doesn't understand what Claggart is saying. When it imports dawn on him he looks "struck as by white leprosy ... He stood like one impaled and gagged." As he speaks Claggart's eyes become inhuman and "alien."

Budd is "transfixed" and so paralyzed he cannot speak even when Vere demands he defend himself. But all Budd can do is produce a "strange dumb gesturing and gurgling." His "amazement" and his horror of the "accuser's eyes" have struck him dumb. His tongue is "convulsed," and he cannot utter a word. Budd is "straining forward in an agony of ineffectual eagerness to obey [Vere's] injunction," but Budd appears to be "suffocating" and cannot talk.

For the first time Vere recognizes Budd stutters. He approaches Budd, touches his shoulder, and says some soothing words to calm him down. "Take your time," he says. The kind words make Budd try even harder to speak. Yet the harder he tries the more tongue-tied he becomes. Budd is rigid with a "paralysis" so extreme it is like a "crucifixion."

An instant later Budd's right arm shoots out at Claggart. His blow is like "a discharged cannon" in its power. Struck on the forehead, Claggart falls over and remains motionless. "What have you *done!*" Vere says in amazement. Vere and Budd try to lift Claggart, but he is dead and they cannot move him. Vere orders Budd to wait in an adjacent stateroom while the captain calls for the ship's surgeon. The surgeon confirms Claggart is dead. The captain exclaims Claggart was "struck dead by an angel of God" who must "hang."

Vere has the surgeon leave. The captain will call a drumhead (shipboard) court to rule on the incident.

Chapter 20

The departing surgeon wonders about Vere's sanity after witnessing "such a tragedy." He thinks calling a drumhead court is a bad idea. Instead Vere should keep Budd locked up and have him tried later by a court of the admiralty. Again the surgeon wonders if the captain is "unhinged." He ponders that even if the captain is impaired it would be mutiny for the surgeon to question his judgment. The surgeon tells some other officers about the upcoming drumhead court. They, too, are concerned about the captain's decision and think the entire matter should be postponed until it can be brought before the

admiralty.

Analysis

The theme of innocence and malice dominates this section. Some part of Claggart recognizes the goodness in Budd to the extent he might even have been able to "love [him] but for fate." Claggart's eyes are "strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears" when he looks upon Budd. But his "sorrow" quickly turns into a "pinching and shriveling look," and his eyes emit a "fierce light" when he sees Budd. The intent here seems to be to imply that at moments of weakness even Claggart is fleetingly affected by Budd's innocence. Just as quickly, though, Claggart's malice overpowers his softer feelings.

Budd is oblivious to Claggart's plots against him. In his innocence Budd takes Claggart's pleasant words at face value. His innocence was his blinder to Claggart's devious dissembling. Budd is too "ignorant [and] innocent" to recognize the "proximity of the malign" in Claggart. Similarly Budd is unconcerned when Vere's hammock-boy summons him to the captain's cabin. Budd knows he's done nothing wrong, and he can't conceive of an evil that would falsely accuse him of any misdeed. Budd is even too innocent to understand that the "peculiar" glances he gets from officers who share the mess with Claggart might arise from their participation in the master-at-arms's intrigue. Even the afterguardsman's "crookedness" is undermined by Budd's perfect, simple innocence.

Budd's innocence is so pure a biblical reference is used to describe him. Budd is said to be like "Adam before the Fall." In the Garden of Eden, Adam had no knowledge of evil. If Budd is truly like Adam, he is totally without sin and is so innocent he cannot at first understand what Claggart is saying to him in Vere's cabin. Budd's innocence is of the kind that finds evil in others incomprehensible and, when sensed, horrifying. The narrator never explains why Budd strikes Claggart with his arm like "a discharged cannon." Is the blow compensation for Budd's inability to defend himself? Is it the only form of communication he can muster in the face of pure evil? Is it a type of divine retribution for Claggart's evil and his diabolical plots? Does Budd intend to kill? If not why does he lash out so fiercely, so fatally? It is up to the reader to decide.

Claggart's evil is pure, horrific, and manipulative. He plays at being the humble servant to Vere, but his eyes burn his evil intent into Budd when he confronts him with accusations of

mutiny. Animal motifs are used to convey Claggart's looks and actions during his confrontation with Budd. When Claggart loses "human expression" his "protruding ... alien eyes" resemble those "gelid" eyes of monstrous "creatures of the deep." His initial gaze at Budd is one of "surprised fascination," intended to mesmerize Budd. Once Budd is in his thrall, Claggart's look becomes "the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish." Claggart is portrayed as the overwhelming and inescapable predator.

Claggart's malice is entwined with the motif of mutiny. Claggart is very shrewd. He understands how paranoid Captain Vere is about the possibility of mutiny, so it is a brilliant ploy to concoct an accusation against Budd as a potential mutineer. Yet Claggart's evil genius goes even further. Although it is unstated, it is very likely Claggart timed his accusation to coincide with the *Bellipotent's* isolation from the rest of the British fleet. Claggart succeeds in his demonic plan by betting—correctly—that the anxious Captain Vere will want to try Budd for treason as soon as possible. Vere will be so paranoid about mutiny he will not want to wait to have Budd tried later, when the warship joins the rest of the fleet. Even if Budd is locked up while the warship heads back to the fleet, Claggart bets Vere would fear Budd's imprisonment might foment a mutiny. By waiting to bring his accusations to Vere when the warship is so far away, Claggart somehow knows Vere will use the law to destroy Budd immediately. Then Claggart will not have to worry that his flimsy "substantiations" of Budd's guilt might be rejected by an admiralty court. It's a brilliant plan hatched by someone described as "no uneducated man." This reference calls to mind the symbol of knowledge and its relationship to education and civilization. There is situational irony in the fact that the educated man in question is a "madman" consumed by hatred. Claggart's education belies the fact he's not at all civilized but acts like a vicious, insane savage.

The symbol of Billy Budd's stammer is vital to what occurs, yet exactly what causes his vocal paralysis is not made clear. Does Budd's paralyzed muteness arise from his inability to confront evil and verbally destroy it? Or is Budd's now-frozen stutter a symbol of his purity and superhumanness? Perhaps Budd is gripped by paralyzing silence because he cannot communicate with the baser aspects of human nature. If Budd is truly a divine nature far above that of sinful mortals, perhaps his clenched jaw reveals his elevation above sinful human nature. Budd's agony at trying but failing to defend himself, as Vere demands, is described as a "suffocation" and "crucifixion." The

biblical motif seems to point to Budd's "convulsed tongue-tie" as an aspect of his pure, Christ-like divinity, which is struck dumb when it must engage with deep, innate human evil (although Jesus did not have the same impediment). Another biblical reference underscores this interpretation when Captain Vere exclaims after Budd has killed Claggart: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Budd is at once divine but all-too human. He is a human who must be executed, but then so was Christ executed. Is the equation deliberate?

The motif of the Handsome Sailor is used to convey Budd's natural cheerfulness and the good will other sailors feel toward him. The narrator states that as a Handsome Sailor Budd is humble and does not put himself forward as someone superior to others. The motif of appearance is presented both as a key to or diversion from a character's true identity. Budd is just what he seems. But Claggart assumes the appearance of a sane and reasonable man, especially before his superior, Captain Vere. Claggart uses this veneer of normality and pseudo-sanity to mask the "monomania" that is eating ever deeper into his mind and soul. He appears before Vere as a humble underling, "cap in hand." Even a man of the world like Captain Vere gets only a hint of Claggart's true nature, as when the captain feels a vague "repellent distaste" around Claggart. Only on rare occasions, as when Claggart looks directly into Budd's eyes, is his true malice revealed.

The theme of truth, rumor, and falsehood is the engine of the action in Chapter 18. Claggart's accusations are not just flimsy rumors, they are absolute falsehoods. They are the result of the deceptions and entrapments Claggart and his "corporals" used to snare Budd. The reader does not even know—is not told by the narrator—what if any words or actions Budd was tricked into to support Claggart's allegations. It is likely Budd never fell into any of Claggart's nefarious traps. It is probable, if not certain, that Claggart's allegations are entirely false and baseless. The only "evidence" he offers of Budd's guilt is his jumping from the merchant ship into Ratcliffe's boat. And his presentation of that incident is mere personal interpretation and not evidence of anything. Even Captain Vere, who knows little about Claggart, intuitively that the master-at-arms is more of a "perjurious witness" than a man offering concrete evidence or truth.

The theme of duty comes into play when Captain Vere's excellence as a commander has him steer his warship far from the fleet to chase enemy ships. Vere can be relied on always to do his duty as a commander and to do it well. The reader is

also told Vere can be relied on "under unforeseen difficulties" to take "a prompt initiative." Vere's sense of duty and his reputation for taking quick and decisive action are exploited by Claggart, who knows it's the captain's duty to crush any hint of mutiny on his ship. Vere had a "strong suspicion" about Claggart that engendered "strange dubieties [doubts]." But in the end Vere cannot let his doubts overrule his duty. This duty will force Vere to take Claggart's statements at least somewhat seriously in case they contain a germ of truth about an insurrection. Vere is astonished when Claggart identifies Budd as the mutineer, but it is Vere's duty to take seriously even the most outlandish suspicion of mutiny. Vere cannot ignore his duty to the navy.

Captain Vere's sense of duty hardens after Claggart is dead. Earlier when Budd was paralyzed with speechlessness Vere soothed him as a father might. Now Vere assumes the role of the "military disciplinarian," the commander who must do his duty in carrying out the harsh, prescribed treatment of a murderer. The captain's strict adherence to his military duty and military law is so extreme his sanity is questioned by the surgeon and some other officers on board ship. This is the first time the reader might ask if an overzealous sense of duty might be undermining Vere's conscience and moral obligation.

Intertwining themes of justice and the law emerge during Claggart's allegations. Vere is so suspicious of Claggart's charges he warns the man to "heed what you speak ... in a case like this, there is a yard-arm-end for the false witness." Vere seeks justice for Budd by trying to determine the truth of what Claggart says. He also invokes the law that punishes false witness with death by hanging. It is Vere's suspicion that Claggart is bearing false witness that impels him to summon Budd to answer Claggart's charges.

Chapter 21

Summary

The narrator compares the line between sanity and insanity to the shading of colors blended into a rainbow. He says the reader must decide if Captain Vere's state of mind indicates sanity or insanity. The narrator then goes on to suggest that the timing of this accusation was unfortunate, as it occurred when ships' captains were so paranoid about mutiny.

There are legal implications on both sides of the event. In one sense Claggart is culpable for making unsubstantiated accusations against a "blameless" sailor. On the other side is the "most heinous of military crimes," Budd's murder of Claggart. Captain Vere isn't required to determine the right and wrong of what happened but to apply military law. Yet Vere feels a certain "circumspection" in deciding what to do because the guilt and innocence of those involved are so complicated. His main motive, however, is said to be "to guard as much as possible against publicity" of the incident. The narrator suggests, "Here he may or may not have erred." Yet Vere's decisions were criticized (secretly) by other ship's officers. Keeping the incident and court proceedings under wraps is compared to a sort of underhanded palace intrigue.

Captain Vere might have chosen to keep Budd locked up until his case could be submitted "to the judgment of [the admiralty]," but Vere's "vows of allegiance to martial duty" lead him to opt for a speedy trial on board. His reason for this decision is said to be his fear that keeping Budd imprisoned on the ship might lead to an insurrection among the other sailors. Lastly it is not against British naval law to try a case such as this on board ship, with some of the ship's officers sitting in judgment. Vere asks the first lieutenant, the captain of marines, and the sailing master to be the judges in the drumhead court. Vere has some "misgivings" about including the officer of marines who he worries may not "prove altogether reliable" in judging such a thorny case. Vere also worries that although the other two judges are honest they have little experience in legal matters.

The court is held in the captain's cabin. Budd is brought in from the adjacent stateroom. As Claggart is dead, Captain Vere is the only witness in the case. He "narrate[s] all that had led up to the catastrophe, omitting nothing in Claggart's accusation, and deposing as to the manner in which the prisoner had received it." The judges "glance with no little surprise at Billy Budd, the last man they would have suspected, either of the mutinous design ... or of the undeniable deed he himself had done."

When Vere has finished testifying, the judges ask Budd, "Is it or is it not as Captain Vere says?" Budd finds his voice and says, "It is just as Captain Vere says, but it is not as the master-at-arms said." With some emotion Vere tells Budd, "I believe you, my man." When asked, Budd insists he "never bore malice against the master-at-arms." Then he explains, "Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him ... and I had to say

something, and I could only say it with a blow. God help me!"

When asked if he knew of any mutinous plot on board Budd hesitates. He does not want to implicate the afterguardsman in a mutiny. Budd again refuses to be an "informer," so he answers no. The last question they put to Budd is why Claggart would have such malice toward Budd to lie so egregiously about him. Budd's confusion when confronted with a question about evil intent is interpreted by the court as indicating he might be hiding his guilt. Budd looks to Captain Vere for help, and Vere responds for him. He says Budd cannot know the motivations of another man; only Claggart could answer that question and he is dead.

Vere asks the court to focus its "attention to the blow's consequence" and the blow itself as the "striker's deed." The judges are somewhat shocked by this statement because it seemed to be a "prejudgment on the speaker's part." It also rekindles their doubt about the captain's state of mind. When one judge says the entire incident is a "mystery," Vere agrees. But he reminds them their job is to ignore the mystery and judge only according to military law.

Budd is brought back to the stateroom. The judges "exchange looks of troubled indecision." After whispering together for a while, the judges are confronted by Vere, who seems to be considering how to approach the "well-meaning men not intellectually mature ... to demonstrate certain principles that were axioms to himself." Vere reveals his pedantry in speaking to the judges, stating they should abandon their "hesitancy" and do their duty as the law demands because the law is "paramount."

Vere launches into a long speech in which he urges them to ignore their "scruples" and think only of the "overt act" that caused Claggart's death. Their decision should show no allegiance to Nature (conscience) but only to the king. He understands they have an emotional reaction to what happened but says they should "let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool." Vere reiterates that murder is a capital crime, but the judges interrupt to state that Budd intended neither mutiny nor murder. Vere replies an ordinary court might take that extenuating circumstance into account, but a martial court cannot. He reminds them they are operating under the severe tenets of the Mutiny Act, which is merciless. "Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose," he says.

The judges then ask if they might mitigate the penalty if they have to convict Budd. Vere replies "clemency" would be a sign

of weakness, a bad example to the other sailors, and perhaps an invitation to mutiny. The penalty for murder must be carried out to the letter. The captain says he, too, feels for Budd, but he's sure Budd would understand why they need to execute him for his deed. The judges sit silent, all of them afraid to disagree with the captain. In the end Vere's appeal to their "instinct as sea-officers" to convict and sentence Budd to the ultimate penalty wins the day.

The narrator seems to support Vere's point of view by relating another case in which a ship's captain had a man convicted of shipboard murder hanged for his crime. The admiralty approved this captain's action, carried out in a time of peace. The narrator quotes a historian who also agrees with the type of action Vere takes, especially as it is a time of war "when it is imperative promptly to act." So Billy Budd is convicted and sentenced to be hanged from the yard-arm early the next morning.

Analysis

The theme of law, conscience, and morality and the theme of loyalty, duty, and justice are the subjects of this chapter. The chapter opens with the narrator reinforcing the truth that the line between sanity and insanity is hard to delineate. This is important as later in the chapter the reader will see that the line between morality and the law is at least as hazy.

Captain Vere is strictly devoted to duty, to upholding martial law with "prudence and vigor." The reader is told that the matter at hand is not one of determining "right from wrong"—which is called "a primitive basis" for judgment—but rather one of adhering strictly to the more "civilized" Mutiny Law of the Royal Navy. Vere would "fain ... have deferred taking any action [on board and] submit[ed] the matter to the judgment of this admiral." But his "vows of allegiance to martial duty" make him determined not to wait. During the trial Vere continually steers the judges to the act that killed Claggart. When the judges remark that what happened during the fatal confrontation is a "mystery," Vere agrees. Yet he abjures them to ignore the mystery and concentrate instead on "the prisoner's deed. With that alone we have to do." Vere's duty to martial law is so rigid it does not allow him to permit any other considerations in the trial.

When lecturing the judges Vere rejects their inclination toward compassion, saying, "Do these buttons that we wear [on our

navy uniforms] attest that our allegiance is to Nature [compassion]?" He answers his own question: "No, to the King ... [in whose service] we cease to be natural free agents." Vere concludes their only responsibility is that "however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it."

Then Vere addresses the judges' troubled consciences, asking if "private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?" Further, "before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one that plea [for mercy] would largely extenuate." But under "the law of the Mutiny Act" extenuating circumstances cannot be taken into account. Therefore, neither can conscience or morality.

After testifying as the only witness and after Budd is taken away, Vere becomes the voice of the law and martial justice. He is aware of the judges' "hesitancy ... proceeding ... from the clashing of military duty with moral scruple—scruple vitalized by compassion." Vere even claims to share their compassion. Yet he insists that his "paramount obligation ... [is to] strive against scruples that may tend to enervate decision." Vere is expressing his devotion to the law, but he is not being altogether honest. Vere's statement indicates a preordained decision, even though the judges have not yet reached their own decision. In his mind Vere is resolute and determined to see his prejudgment accepted by the court. Compassion can lead to a decision different from the one Vere is set on. Mercy might "enervate" Vere's preset decision, but it can also lead to a different (more merciful) decision. Vere will not allow that. His decision must be the decision of the court.

The motif of mutiny is crucial in guiding the action and outcome of the proceedings. Captain Vere and the court are applying a part of the draconian Mutiny Law, which allows for no "clemency" or "extenuating" circumstances to mitigate a judgment or penalty. As he thinks about what to do, Vere worries that should the sailors learn of postponing the trial it would "awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew," and this created in Vere a "sense of urgency" to proceed immediately. Therefore Vere demands a swift shipboard (drumhead) court to prevent news of the murder from reaching the crew. Later in his argument to the judges Vere insists showing clemency would be a sign of weakness that might embolden the ship's sailors to "provoke new troubles," or mutiny. If mercy is shown, Vere says, "Will not [the sailors] revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay." Yet

Vere is oblivious to the possibility that hanging Budd, who is beloved by the sailors, might be seen as so unjust as to incite them to mutiny. Vere is blinded to this possibility by his unrelenting determination to get the court to condemn Budd to hang.

Loyalty is on display among the main actors in this chapter. Vere is unquestioningly loyal to the navy and its harsh law. Budd, too, swears his national loyalty: "I have eaten the King's bread, and I am true to the King." The only time Budd seems to waver is when he's troubled at possibly implicating the afterguardsman in a supposed conspiracy. Budd does not implicate him, and perhaps Budd sees no (or little) conflict between his loyalty to the king and his loyalty to his fellow sailors.

Budd shows loyalty to—and misplaced trust in—Captain Vere. When Budd is asked by the judges why Claggart would tell lies and conspire against him, Budd cannot say. The tongue-tied Budd turns to Vere for help in answering the question. Vere rightly states, "How can [Budd] or anyone else [answer] unless indeed it be he who lies within there [Claggart]?" Vere saves Budd from having to answer this unanswerable question. But this and previous incidents during the trial reveal a certain situational irony: Budd seeks help from and truly trusts the one man in the court who feels duty-bound to condemn him. This is made clear immediately after this question is put when Vere says the court must "confine its attention to the blow's consequences ... [to] the striker's deed." Vere's meaning is so plain to the judges they suspect Vere of "prejudgment." Still Budd seems not to understand what Vere means. The narrator uses animal imagery to paint Budd's confusion as like that of a dog looking at its master, "seeking in his face some elucidation of a previous gesture ambiguous to the canine intelligence."

The concept of guilt becomes confused within the theme of innocence and malice. Vere and the court must judge guilt and innocence based not on the qualities or characters of the men involved in the incident but on the criminal act. Their dilemma therefore is that from a legal perspective, "the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless," with a consequence that "the deed of the latter ... constituted the most heinous of military crimes"—murder. In other words the person who has a purely innocent character is guilty of a criminal act brought on by the malicious plots of an evil man who ends up being the victim. There is situational irony in this, but tragedy and ambiguity as well. It is a moral knot difficult to untangle.

Billy Budd is recognized by the judges as an innocent. Yet Budd himself admits his inability to respond to Claggart with words caused him to respond with a blow. He is absolutely truthful and guileless in admitting the guilt in his action at the same time he demonstrates the innocence of its motivation.

The symbol of knowledge is implied as a representation of morality. Vere supposedly appoints to be court judges the best men he has. Although they are competent at their shipboard jobs and in battle, Vere worries they "might not prove altogether reliable in a moral dilemma involving aught of the tragic." The insinuation is the judges are good naval officers but otherwise uneducated and of lower status (less civilized) than the intellectual Captain Vere. Vere therefore assumes they have little ability to consider the moral aspects of the case. Again there is situational irony at play here, as it is the "low-class" judges who demonstrate the deepest and most compassionate morality while Vere devalues morality to adhere to the unyielding letter of the law. The narrator makes this plain when Vere, after reflecting for a few minutes, wonders how to address the judges, whom he deems beneath him and thus in need of education about what to him is axiomatic. Yet as the trial proceeds it will be Vere who is revealed as perhaps less mature—if not intellectually then at least morally.

The supposed lack of knowledge among the judges is described as somehow bothering Vere. He is said to be disturbed because they lack sufficiently "mature" morality and principles. But what if Vere appointed them precisely because he deemed them lacking in maturity? Vere's haranguing of the judges to get them to convict and condemn Billy Budd may demonstrate the power he knows he has over them. It might be the case that Vere appointed these particular judges because he knew they were malleable and would bend to his arguments and his will. If this was Vere's motivation, then he was correct.

Early on in the trial the narrator says, "Very far was [Vere] from embracing opportunities for monopolizing to himself the perils of moral responsibility." By appointing cowed subordinates as judges, Vere creates a situation in which he is able to transfer the "moral responsibility" of condemning Budd from himself to his hand-picked judges. As the trial proceeds the judges become cowed by Vere's relentless arguments for a guilty verdict. They are so browbeaten they "hardly had the inclination to gainsay ... their superior in mind [and] in naval rank." In short they do Vere's bidding. They relieve Vere from having to make an uncomfortable moral choice himself. They ignore their morality and consciences and convict Billy Budd

"without appeal."

Chapter 17 reintroduces the book's most direct implication of the motif of homoeroticism. Claggart is described when his

unobserved glance happened to light on Billy ... [who is] exchanging passing broadsides of fun with other young [sailors], that glance would follow the cheerful sea-Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his (Claggart's) eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like a man of sorrows ... [having] a melancholy expression [with] a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban.

The reader is then told, "But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shriveling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut." Claggart quickly crushes these tender feelings for Budd, but there is no question that the quote implies they lie somewhere under the surface of his steely malice.

The motif of homoeroticism may also be implied in Captain Vere's reaction to Claggart's accusation against Billy Budd in Chapter 18. Budd's "conduct ... had fallen under the captain's notice [and] had confirmed that first happy augury [that Billy] ... seemed to be such that [Vere] thought of recommending him to the executive officer for promotion to a place that would more frequently bring him under [Vere's] own observation." This quote might be interpreted as expressing Vere's unacknowledged sexual attraction to Billy Budd, who Vere wants to keep close to him so he can observe him (and his

beauty) more frequently. However, it may simply be the case that Vere wants to promote Budd simply because Budd is a highly competent sailor. The reader must decide.

Chapters 22–25

Summary

Chapter 22

Captain Vere goes into the stateroom to tell Billy Budd of the verdict and sentence. The narrator confesses nothing is known about what was said during that meeting. Yet he suggests it is likely that Vere was frank about Budd's situation and his role in getting the court to reach a guilty verdict. The narrator imagines Budd receiving this news "not without a sort of joy" because he was "not afraid to die." Or perhaps Captain Vere maintained his stern military demeanor in conveying Budd's fate to him. The "privacy" of the conversation is "inviolable," so no one will ever know what transpired.

A senior lieutenant who is the first to see Vere leaving the stateroom thought the captain's expression betrayed "the agony of the strong." The lieutenant is "startled" by this look and wonders that the conveyor of the verdict might be suffering more than the condemned man.

Chapter 23

The sailors and officers on the ship become aware that something important has happened. Rumors fly about what happened involving Claggart, Budd, and the captain. Both Claggart and Budd had been seen entering the captain's cabin, but neither had been seen leaving it.

Captain Vere calls all sailors to assemble on deck. Armed marine guards line up to the sides of the assembled men. In clear and concise terms, showing no emotion, Captain Vere explains to the crew what happened in his cabin: Claggart is dead and his killer has been tried and condemned to die early the next morning. The assembled men listen in silence, but a "confused murmur went up" when Vere finished speaking. The murmuring is suppressed by a loud whistle to get the men to disperse.

Claggart's body is prepared for burial at sea according to strict naval guidelines. Budd is transferred under guard out of the captain's cabin. Captain Vere has no further communication with Budd, and Vere has strict orders that no one else on the ship communicate with the condemned man. Only the chaplain may speak with Budd.

Chapter 24

This chapter opens with a description of the exposed spar deck, which is located above the upper gun deck. Billy Budd is lying down, chained to a part of the upper gun deck. Sentries guard him. All around are the heavy cannon and other weapons of war. Most things on the gun deck are painted in a black "funereal" hue. Budd stands out because he is dressed all in white, though his clothes are a bit dirty. Yet they "glimmer" in the early dawn light. Flickering lanterns cast "splashes of dirty yellow light" on the gun deck.

Budd's "agony" is over because he no longer has to experience the "diabolical incarnate" that was Claggart. Budd lay as if in a "trance" and like a "slumbering child in the cradle." The chaplain comes to see Budd but does not want to awaken him. As he leaves he notes Budd seems to be in a state of transcendent peace. A few hours later the chaplain returns to find Budd awake. Budd greets the chaplain almost "cheerfully." Budd has accepted his death so there's little guidance the chaplain can offer him. Budd has no "irrational fear" of death, and the chaplain's discourse about "salvation and a Savior" means nothing to Budd. The chaplain recognizes Budd's "innocence was even a better thing than religion," and so he stops talking. Upon leaving the chaplain leans over and kisses Budd's cheek. The narrator then explains the chaplain did nothing to plead for mercy for Budd because a warship's chaplain serves to "lend the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but force."

Chapter 25

Dawn comes slowly to the warship. At four o'clock in the morning a whistle summons all on board to "witness punishment" of Billy Budd. The entire crew assembles on deck. Most are silent, but a few whisper quietly. Captain Vere comes out onto the high officer's deck and views the assembled sailors.

Budd will be hanged from the spar on the main yard. Budd is brought to this place with the chaplain by his side. The rope is placed around Budd's neck. Just before he's executed Budd cries loudly, "God bless Captain Vere!" These words have a "phenomenal" effect on everyone there. His pure voice and "spiritualized" beauty enhance the effect of this astonishing statement. Then instantly, without forethought, the assembled sailors take up the cry, echoing "God bless Captain Vere!" even though "at that instant Billy alone must have been in their hearts." Throughout Captain Vere stands rigidly in a "sort of momentary paralysis."

Budd is hanged, but his body does not move at all. His lack of motion when the rope tightens around his neck and kills him astounds the men.

Analysis

The theme of innocence and the symbol of knowledge as the mark of civilization are important in understanding these chapters.

Budd's innocence is evident to Vere when the captain realizes Budd "is not afraid to die." Vere suffers the "agony of the strong" when faced with Budd's peace and acceptance of death. Vere is not evil or malicious, but he suffers because he understands he has ordered the death of an innocent. As he lay in chains Budd is said to be clad in shroudlike white that "dimly glimmered" in the dirty lantern light. As he awaits execution Budd is again likened to the Handsome Sailor, a motif representing the innocence, goodness, and beauty of the perfect sailor. Budd's innocence is revealed in his face, which is "delicate [and] warm-tinted." Budd's "agony" is over because the incarnation of evil, Claggart, is dead. Budd feels no tension but lies like "a slumbering child ... [with] a serene happy light" emanating from his face.

Budd's innocence is further established when the chaplain realizes Budd exists at a spiritual level beyond the need for solace and religious comfort. Budd is ready to die and has no fear of it. His "peace transcending" all worldly things makes Budd welcome his death. The chaplain recognizes Budd's "innocence is ... better than religion"; his spirituality and purity transcend the teachings of the Church. When the chaplain kisses Budd's cheek he "[does] not fear for his future" for he knows Budd is a spiritual being.

When Budd is brought up to the spar to be hanged, he calls out a blessing for Captain Vere. Budd's voice sounds like "the clear melody of a singing-bird." Budd's "rare personal beauty ... [is] spiritualized." Budd's lack of physical movement when he dies further emphasizes his lack of attachment to his body and his true identity as a spiritual being. The image of the Lamb of God (Christ) "seen in mystical vision" is used to describe Budd's death scene.

The symbol of knowledge as the mark of a worthy and civilized person is ironically applied to Budd just prior to his execution. The narrator states Budd "was incapable of conceiving what death really is," which is why "he was wholly without irrational fear of it." In fact Budd is fearless because, it must be assumed, he knows precisely what death is and why he is unafraid of it. Instead of marveling at Budd's equanimity, the narrator explains "fear [of death is] more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterated Nature." Thus, by extension, civilized people are more "irrational" than "barbarians"—a suggestion that would horrify those who identify as "civilized." Budd is referred to as "a barbarian" because he is close to Nature and has no fear of death and thus no "irrational" fear. The situational irony is that spirituality and fearlessness in the face of death are portrayed as "barbaric" when in fact this degree of spirituality is rational and "angelic." It is the civilized man who, cowering and irrationally fearful before death, is less evolved spiritually than the so-called barbarian.

The motif of biblical references is important when the narrator speculates Vere may "have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest" of God. Vere is likened to Abraham, who is filled with relief and love for his son when God calls off Isaac's sacrifice. The biblical reference humanizes Vere by suggesting his emotions were stirred by Budd's fate. It might even mean Vere truly hoped Budd could be spared. Yet the comparison to the Bible story also dovetails with Vere's "austere ... military duty." God in the Bible is as implacable as military law, and Vere must do his duty to martial law as Abraham did his duty to God. In a sense, of course, British naval law is even more draconian than the harsh demands of the Old Testament God. God spares Isaac at the last minute. Military law—and those whose duty it is to carry it out—spares no one.

It is arguable the chaplain's kiss may represent Judas's kiss in

the Bible. Judas kissed Jesus to identify him to the Romans, thus betraying him. The comparability of the chaplain's kiss on Budd's cheek may be a type of betrayal, as the narrator states "the worthy man lifted not a finger to avert the doom of such a martyr to martial discipline." And although the chaplain is "a minister of the Prince of Peace [he serves] ... the God of War." Perhaps the narrator is equating the chaplain and his unwillingness to try to save Billy Budd with Judas. Thus the chaplain's subservience to the purveyors of war is an act of betrayal just as Judas's kiss was.

As Budd is hanged a vapory fleece in the sky is "shot through with a soft glory." The image of "fleece" refers to Christ, or the Lamb. The text then conflates Budd's death with "the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision," signifying that Billy Budd is indeed a Christ-like figure.

The symbol of the spar is mentioned in Chapter 23. It is a white cross-bar described as being "silvered" by moonlight. In Chapter 24 the spar deck is said to be above the gun deck, which may underline its elevation above worldly evil as represented by the cannons and other weapons of war. Billy Budd is executed by being hanged from the spar, which represents a cross such as the one on which Christ was crucified.

Chapters 26–30

Summary

Chapter 26

The ship's purser and its surgeon are dining together at the mess and conversing. The purser wonders if it was Budd's "will-power" that kept his body motionless when he was hanged. The surgeon counters that all motion or lack of motion is physiological—a result of "mechanical spasm in the muscular system." Yet the purser gets the surgeon to admit that a hanged man "invariably" displays muscular spasms. The surgeon replies he cannot truly account for Budd's lack of spasms but suggests their absence probably came from Budd's heart stopping suddenly. The surgeon does admit the lack of spasms was "phenomenal" insofar as it cannot be easily explained. The purser goes on to wonder if Budd's strange

manner of death was a form of "euthanasia," a proposition the surgeon rejects as being "imaginative and metaphysical." The surgeon then abruptly leaves.

Chapter 27

The narrator describes the strange silence at the moment of Budd's execution. The silence was broken only by the "murmurous indistinctness" of the sound of the sea. The narrator speculates it was the sound of "capricious revulsion" reflecting the sailors' feelings. As the sailors begin to murmur they are ordered to be silent and to clear the deck. Most seamen leave, but those working on deck remain. A while later the sailors are called back on deck to witness Billy Budd's burial at sea. As Budd's body slides into the sea the sailors begin to murmur. A flock of birds flies to the spot where Budd's body submerged, and even after the ship moves away the birds continue to circle the spot where Budd sank.

A drumbeat disperses the assembled sailors to their work on the ship's decks. Captain Vere has them disperse early to preclude any grumbling or revolt arising from Budd's execution. For Vere "forms, measured forms, are everything," and he uses the drumbeat command to impose form, or order, on the crew. Then a band on the quarter-deck plays "a sacred air," and the chaplain conducts a morning religious service. The clear, serene day begins.

Chapter 28

The narrator introduces the last three chapters as a kind of "sequel" to Budd's story.

The narrator says that the French warship *St. Louis* has been "rechristened" the *Athée* (The Atheist), which the narrator feels is more appropriate for a ship of the anticlerical revolutionary French. On its return trip to rejoin the British fleet, the *Bellipotent* engages with the *Athée*. During the confrontation Captain Vere is wounded. A senior officer takes over the fight, and the French ship is taken. All return to Gibraltar where Vere is taken ashore for medical treatment.

Vere's condition worsens. As he nears death he murmurs "Billy Budd, Billy Budd." Those who hear him say it note there was no remorse in Vere's voice.

Chapter 29

A few weeks after Budd's execution, an article about it and the incident that led up to it is published in a Mediterranean weekly newspaper. Although the narrator says the article was written "in good faith," it was clearly based largely on rumor.

The newspaper article completely misrepresents the story as told so far. It states Claggart had in truth discovered a mutinous plot led by Billy Budd. When Claggart reported the plot, the vicious Budd stabbed him in the heart with a knife he had hidden on his person. The vileness of the deed reveals, the article insists, that Budd "was no Englishman," for no true Englishman could commit such a heinous act. Budd must have been "an alien." Budd's execution was justified because of his "extreme depravity" in killing Claggart, a "respectable ... gentleman" and a "strong patriot." Budd's swift punishment was "salutary."

This article is the only record produced about the incident. And although the article is now long "forgotten," it is "all that hitherto has stood in the human record to attest what manner of men" were involved in the incident.

Chapter 30

In contrast to the distortion of the newspaper article, the sailors who knew of Budd and his story came to venerate the spar from which Budd was hanged: "They instinctively felt Budd was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of willful murder." The sailors kept the spar for several years, carrying it with them from "ship to dockyard" wherever they went. They recalled only Budd's "face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within."

The sailors' feelings about Billy Budd are recalled in a "Portsmouth ballad," or kind of sea chanty, about him. Although much of the song is not terribly good there are a few lines that commemorate Budd's death as a "Pendant pearl from the yard-arm-end ... 'tis me, not the sentence, they'll suspend" and "Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep ... and the oozy weeds about me twist."

Analysis

The motif of biblical references occurs throughout these final chapters. The argument between the purser and the surgeon about the uncanny motionlessness of Budd's body when he's hanged is essentially a dialogue between religion and atheism, or faith and reason. The purser argues that Budd's lack of spasms is somehow a result of his "will-power," a phrase indicating Budd's superhuman or divine nature and ability to transcend normal physiology. The surgeon is the voice of reason. Although he can't explain why Budd's body didn't spasm he insists this is "phenomenal ... in the sense that it was an appearance, the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned." The surgeon's argument is scientific. The purser's is "metaphysical," implying something divine or otherworldly.

After Budd is executed his body is buried at sea. The birds that fly toward the site of his burial might represent doves, the birds of peace associated with Christ. Even after the warship leaves the area the birds continue to circle over the spot where Budd was submerged. They "circl[ed] low ... [with] outstretched wings and the croaked requiem of their cries." If these somewhat raucous seafowl are the maritime equivalent of doves, they honor or commemorate the spot where Budd went down and sing his praises in their cries. Budd's body would have sunk far beyond the depth at which seabirds could feast on it, so the suggestion the birds were "greed[y] for prey" does not make sense. They are mourning Budd's loss or perhaps celebrating his holy life.

As the day brightens "the fleece of low-hanging vapor had vanished." Earlier "fleece" had been used to represent the Lamb of God (Christ) and Budd's relationship to Christ on the day of his execution. The vanishing fleece, or vapor, in the air indicates Budd has truly departed and perhaps has been liberated to ascend to a spiritual realm or heavenly afterlife. It may also mean that once again a Christ born on Earth has been killed and has abandoned it.

In the last chapter biblical references combine with the symbol of the spar from which Budd was hanged. The sailors who knew of Budd and his death revere the spar as if "it were a piece of the Cross" on which Christ was crucified. They worship Budd in their way, especially as the Handsome Sailor (another motif) who was incapable of an evil thought or act.

The theme of truth, rumor, and falsehood is clearly explored in the newspaper account of Claggart's death and Budd's

execution. The narrator admits the report was "partly rumor," but the entirety of the article is so antithetical to the novel's account of the incidents as to make it seem wholly fabricated. Or might part of the narrator's story be unfounded? Perhaps the narrator's willingness to give some credence to the article reflects his own uncertainty about the truthfulness of his account. The narrator is recounting a story he has heard but not witnessed, so his account may have questionable elements as well. Still the newspaper article turns the entire incident on its head, making Claggart the "respectable" victim and Budd the bloodthirsty and villainous murderer. There are two noteworthy instances of situational irony in this part of the text. First the article describes Budd as an "alien," meaning he is so evil he cannot be a true Englishman. Perhaps, though, there is truth in this description, for if Billy Budd is a Christ-like figure he is "alien" compared to the general run of mankind. Second there is situational irony in the article's supposed "refutation" of Dr. Johnson's famous remark "that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." The newspaper article supposedly "refutes" this remark by attributing patriotism to Claggart, who they elevate to the status of "gentleman." Yet of course, if the narrator's story is to be believed, Claggart is a scoundrel and the mask of patriotism he so cringingly assumes is contemptible.

The narrator addresses the theme of truth and lies at the beginning of Chapter 28. He states, "The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact ... such a narration is apt to be less finished." In a sense the narrator is admitting his story necessarily contains both fact and fable. It cannot be a "finished" work of absolute truth because it is not entirely fact. Such a story is "ragged," and it is up to the reader to decide what is true and what is not.

The theme of conscience and morality is suggested in Captain Vere's dying words. The narrator states that the words "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" were not spoken with remorse. This implies Vere does not feel guilty about executing Budd. Exactly what his last words mean is unclear. It is possible Vere's remorse or sorrow about his role in Budd's death is expressed, but this expression is misinterpreted by those who heard him. It is also possible Vere calls out to Billy Budd as a dying Christian might call out to Jesus. Vere's last words might be a recognition of Billy Budd as a Christ-like figure who will be his salvation after death. Remember that Budd's dying words were "God bless Captain Vere!" Vere's final words might reflect this blessing of God he experiences on his deathbed. There are many ways to

interpret Vere's final words. It's up to the reader to decide which interpretation makes the most sense based on the story.

Finally, a few words should be said about the strange ballad that ends the book ("Billy in the Darbies"—darbies are two-handed plasterer's floats). As mentioned earlier, some critics believe Melville never finished writing *Billy Budd*. Perhaps the weakly poetic ballad was a placeholder left in the manuscript until Melville could finish the story. Yet it may also be intended as a tribute to Budd in the voice of common sailors. They sing of Budd's beauty ("his cheek it was like the budding pink"), his death (a "pendant pearl from the yard-arm-end"), and his acceptance of his death and burial ("And roll me over fair. I am sleepy and the oozy weeds about me twist."). Again, the reader must decide.

“” Quotes

"And good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man!"

— Billy Budd, Chapter 1

Billy Budd says this as he leaves the merchant ship whose name stands for freedom and liberty—all the things he'll be giving up on the warship.

"Billy ... was little more than a sort of upright barbarian ... as Adam presumably might have been [in Eden]."

— Narrator, Chapter 2

Billy Budd is called a "barbarian" because he is not a gentleman in the English view. Budd is likely illiterate, but he is also purely innocent—as Adam was innocent in the Garden of Eden before he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. In the book knowledge is associated with civilization but, according to this quote, absolute innocence is uncivilized, even "barbaric."

"Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances ... ignited into irrational combustion."

— Narrator, Chapter 3

The Nore and similar mutinies against the Royal Navy arose from (practical, or everyday) mistreatment of impressed sailors. The narrator here calls the uprisings "irrational" even though they were incited by real grievances.

"At sea precautionary vigilance was strained against relapse."

— Narrator, Chapter 5

The threat of mutiny made it imperative that ships' commanders be exceptionally vigilant to make sure there was not a hint of muttered discontent that might lead to mutiny. This quote sets up Captain Vere's perhaps overcautious and paranoid fear of mutiny on board his warship.

"As an officer [Vere] never tolerat[ed] an infraction of discipline."

— Narrator, Chapter 6

Captain Vere was a reasonable man, but as a ship's commander he was a strict, even draconian, disciplinarian. He quickly and severely punished a sailor's violation of naval law.

"What [is more] mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound ... evoked in certain exceptional mortals?"

— Narrator, Chapter 11

It is a mystery to the narrator (and reader) why Claggart has such a profound and deep hatred of Billy Budd. Here the narrator tells the reader the innate hatred within some "exceptional" mortals, such as Claggart, is mysterious and its cause or origin cannot be known or explained.

"Civilization, especially if [austere], is auspicious to [depravity]. It folds itself in the mantle of respectability."

— Narrator, Chapter 11

This quote undermines the notion of civilization as it's presented in the text. It implies civilization is a veneer of accepted appearance and behavior that can easily be put on by someone who is not truly civilized but actually depraved. This applies to the behavior and appearance of John Claggart, who uses the outer trappings of civilized men to hide his inner evil.

"[In] Claggart ... was the mania of an evil nature ... born with him and innate."

— Narrator, Chapter 11

Again this quote reinforces the concept that Claggart's consuming hatred of Billy Budd arose from his evil nature. It is a tendency born in him and, as stated above, mysterious in its origins.

"[Billy's] nature ... had in its simplicity never willed malice."

— Narrator, Chapter 12

Claggart is said to hate Billy Budd not for anything Budd has actually said or done but simply because Budd is the antithesis of Claggart. Where Claggart has innate evil and malice, Budd has utter simplicity, innocence, and a mild nature. Claggart hates Budd in part because of his simple and pure nature.

"You have but noted his fair cheek. A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies."

— John Claggart, Chapter 18

Claggart says this to Captain Vere when he accuses Budd of plotting mutiny. Claggart is being clever. He admits that Budd appears "fair," or innocent, but he suggests his good looks hide an evil nature. There is irony here in that it is Claggart who uses the disguise of a civilized man to hide his malicious intentions.

"To an immature nature, essentially honest and humane, forewarning intimations of subtler danger from one's kind come tardily, if at all."

— Narrator, Chapter 19

Billy Budd is so purely honest and good he cannot take seriously the warnings he gets about Claggart from Dansker. He cannot comprehend a being who plots and does evil so he doesn't recognize Claggart's malice at all.

"Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him."

— Billy Budd, Chapter 21

Billy Budd says this to Captain Vere and the court officers to

explain why he struck Claggart, killing him. Budd was so shocked by Claggart's accusations (and his evil intent) that he was speechless and could not defend himself against Claggart's charges. Instead he instinctively reacts to Claggart's malice by striking out. Here he explains his action as compensation for his muteness.

"I strive against scruples that may tend to enervate decision."

— Captain Vere, Chapter 21

Captain Vere feels it is his duty to strictly adhere to martial law. To do so in Budd's case means he has to put aside any scruples—principles or conscience—he may have about punishing Budd. He must also ignore extenuating circumstances that might interfere with his imposing the ultimate punishment on Budd.

"Now and then ... a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face."

— Narrator, Chapter 24

This is how Billy Budd looks as he lies chained on deck waiting to be executed. He is serene—and fearless—in the face of death. In fact the quote suggests that Budd is happy because he remembers or dreams about a better place he knows of—perhaps a place where his true saintly identity exists.

"Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges."

— Narrator, Chapter 28

This quote is important in understanding the questionable veracity of the narrator's version of Billy Budd's story. He is

admitting here that his story may not be totally true. It may have "ragged edges" that leave many questions unanswered and some incidents unclear.

Symbols

Names

The names of both people and ships represent characteristics or roles in the story. For example, Billy Budd's last name may represent his potential to open to a more perfect beauty (as the bud of a flower). Captain Vere's last name may refer to the word *veer*, indicating his understanding that his sentencing of Budd is unjust—a judgment that will haunt him later in life when he "veers" more toward his moral sensibility.

The ships' names are important symbols. Billy Budd is impressed from the merchant ship the *Rights-of-Man*. This name is taken from the title of Thomas Paine's book on freedom and democracy. In this book Paine argues strongly for individuals' rights and the democratic form of government that would ensure these rights. Yet from this ship of "freedom" Billy Budd is impressed onto the *Bellipotent*, a ship whose name means "the power of war." On a warship all rights and freedoms are sacrificed to the dictatorial, all-powerful military and its commanders. Clearly the ships' names represent Budd's loss of his freedom and rights and his entrapment in an uncaring and inhuman institution—itsself a symbol of society's power to destroy individuals' rights and freedoms.

Note that in some editions of *Billy Budd* the navy ship is named the *Indomitable*, which means "invincible" or "unconquerable." This name, too, conveys the powerlessness of the individual to gain any rights or freedoms from a rigid and overpowering institution or society.

Stammer

Billy Budd's stammer is his one "defect." Its symbolism may be

twofold. This flaw may be the imperfection that mars Budd's otherwise Christ-like persona and may be interpreted as a flaw that makes Budd more human (less godlike and perfect). On the other hand it may reinforce Budd's divine persona. The stutter is in a sense something that separates Budd from other humans (because he's godlike). The stutter limits Budd's ability to communicate with other people, especially in crucial circumstances.

Budd stammers when he is confronted by evil or lies. His stutter leaves Budd defenseless when Claggart describes Budd's supposed treachery to Captain Vere. Vere asks Budd to defend himself, but Budd's stutter is so severe he cannot say anything in his own defense. Budd's crippling stutter seals his fate. Is it then a fatal flaw, or does it represent a means of preserving his purity and accomplishing his martyrdom?

Knowledge

In this tale knowledge represents civilization and its hubris and bigotry. Captain Vere and other educated and knowledgeable characters see themselves as the only truly civilized people on board (and, indeed, in the British Empire or the world). Those lower-class, illiterate Britons, or those people who do not have the same culture or values as the British, are often referred to as "barbarians."

Knowledge is therefore not always valued for itself or for the good judgment that experience and learning inform. Instead it is referred to as a mark of innate superiority. It is routinely and casually referenced to elevate the "civilized" and "literate" upper-class Britons from the "uncivilized" and "barbaric" lower classes, as well as those true "primitives" of other cultures. Both types of "barbarians" are easily dismissed, ignored, or mistreated by those with knowledge.

Spar

A spar on a sail-powered ship refers to any wooden poles that hold rigging, or sails. In this story Billy Budd is hanged from a spar, which represents a cross such as the one on which

Christ was crucified.

Thus the spar is a symbol of Billy Budd's Christ-like nature and martyrdom. The spar is therefore a key symbol among the religious symbolism found throughout the story.

Themes

Innocence and Malice

Billy Budd is always described as being an innocent. His beauty—of face, body, and character—exemplifies his purity. He is in fact so innocent he cannot understand the more nefarious impulses of the people he interacts with. He is guileless and incapable of telling a lie, and he deals with others as if they were the same way. He assumes everyone he comes into contact with is honest and well meaning, which makes him extremely vulnerable to manipulation and conspiracies against him. As discussed later, Billy Budd's innocence is so total he is likened to a Christ-like character at various points in the text.

It is Budd's utter innocence that draws forth the malice of certain others, particularly John Claggart. Claggart clearly recognizes Budd's innocence, and it fuels his envy and hatred, as well as his implacable desire to destroy Budd. Claggart is consumed with hatred for Budd simply because he hates his purity so much. Claggart is referred to as an "evil" man who cannot overcome his compulsion to destroy goodness and innocence. Claggart is therefore the embodiment of malice that arises in direct opposition to innocence and is determined to destroy it. Claggart is sometimes referred to as Satanic in his evil.

Loyalty, Duty, and Justice

This story takes place on board a British warship, where each person aboard has his duty to perform in service of the British Crown. Sailors and petty officers are duty-bound to perform their specific tasks and—importantly—to observe the laws and

rules imposed by the British navy. It is Commander Captain Vere's duty to see to it that all laws and rules are obeyed and to mete out specified punishments if any are broken.

All the men on the ship are supposed to be loyal to the British Crown, especially as they are on a British warship. There are other loyalties, born of resentment, among the common sailors, many of whom have been impressed into service. The loyalty among sailors extends to their common welfare and treatment by the officers and the commander. Captain Vere's loyalty is bound to British naval law above all else. He must subsume his feelings if they in any way tend to undermine or compromise his duty to enforce naval law and rules.

Duty can also be a burden insofar as it undermines justice. Captain Vere is unquestioningly loyal to his country's navy, which demands that he uphold the law without exception and regardless of circumstances. But doing his duty in carrying out the law often requires Captain Vere to suppress his sense of justice. Transgressions and the punishments for them are strict and cannot be questioned. Extenuating circumstances are rarely, if ever, open to consideration. Thus Captain Vere feels impelled to do his legal duty while ignoring the human element in the trial and sentencing of Billy Budd. Justice is compromised or wholly undermined when duty demands disregarding humanity. That is especially true when the captain is duty-bound to punish without regard for the extenuating human circumstances surrounding Budd's crime.

Law, Conscience, and Morality

During the period in which the story takes place, British naval law was unbending in its severity and inflexible in its prescribed punishments. It was the ship's captain who primarily determined whether a law was broken aboard ship, organized a trial, and imposed the required punishment. Little or no leeway was available for a captain's personal feelings in these matters.

The unyielding quality of naval law might sometimes lead to deep personal misgivings about carrying out the punishment for a transgression. Yet the captain was expected to ignore his conscience and his personal sense of morality to carry out the requisite punishment. Although at Budd's trial Captain Vere is adamant about the seriousness of the crime and the absolute

need for swift punishment, later on he is shown to be haunted by his guilty conscience. Other petty officers involved in the trial are deeply bothered by the rigidity of the law and their inability to listen to their conscience in ruling on the case. Everyone involved compromises his sense of morality in passing sentence on Billy Budd. They come to feel that their sentencing of Budd is morally wrong, but they are constrained from following their conscience by the harshness of the law.

The essence of this dilemma seems to lie in the story's implication that law is a necessary precondition for modern civilization and, as such, disallows personal sympathy or morality to compromise its prescribed justice. For the officers on board the *Bellipotent*, then, morality is a burden. Being moral in the British navy of the time is problematic and difficult because naval law is so strict. It might be argued that upholding strict military law is in itself a moral duty, but personal morality is beyond reach in such circumstances.

Truth, Rumor, and Falsehood

Billy Budd is the only character in the story who can only tell the truth. In fact he cannot conceive of others lying and does not recognize lies when he hears them. Aside from Billy Budd the truthfulness of the other characters is questionable. Claggart and his minions clearly deal in falsehoods. Claggart plans a deception concocted of deliberate lies. Yet the main currency of information aboard ship is rumor. Rumors spread by the sailors gain so much traction they begin to take on a semblance of truth. It is not always possible to tell if a rumor is based on truth or on falsehood.

Even the narrator cannot be trusted to relate the truth about the story. He tells the story as something he heard that happened in the past. The author seems to want to reinforce his truthfulness by couching his tale in fancy phrases and difficult, erudite sentences. But to some extent this style can be viewed as a type of smokescreen to deflect closer scrutiny that might help the reader distinguish between true and untrue statements in the narrative. Thus the narrator himself is unreliable as a truth-teller. The tale is therefore somewhat ambiguous regarding the truth of the events it describes.

Motifs

Mutiny

The main conflict in *Billy Budd* arises from the paranoia of the British navy at that time. In the late 18th century impressed sailors on some warships organized and carried out highly disruptive mutinies against their commanders to protest their treatment under the laws and practices of the British navy.

The fear of mutiny preys on Captain Vere's mind and is a key motivation for his swift, draconian sentencing of Billy Budd. Vere's paranoia about mutiny is not unfounded. In one key scene it seems as if a sailor approaches Budd to enlist him in a mutiny aboard ship. This scene may or may not indicate a brewing mutiny on board Vere's vessel; the attempt to involve Budd may just be part of Claggart's conspiracy to destroy Budd. Yet the event emphasizes the real danger of mutiny at that time.

The Handsome Sailor: Appearance and Identity

The Handsome Sailor is almost a mythical figure who represents the perfect sailor to the seamen of that time. Melville describes the figure of the Handsome Sailor as

proficient in his perilous calling ... [and possessing] strength and beauty. Tales of his prowess were recited [among sailors]. Ashore he was a champion. ... [He was] a superb figure ... [whose] moral

nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make. Indeed, except as toned by the former, the comeliness and power, always attractive in masculine conjunction, hardly could have drawn the sort of honest homage the Handsome Sailor in some examples received from his less gifted associates. ... Such ... was ...
Billy Budd.

The Handsome Sailor is an idealized figure who is physically beautiful, well liked by his fellow sailors, and physically very strong. Throughout the book Billy Budd is compared to or identified with the Handsome Sailor.

The beauty of the Handsome Sailor is reflected in Billy Budd's appearance. Budd is "welkin-eyed," golden haired, beautiful of feature and form, a strong and uncomplaining worker, and invariably cheerful and genial. He is also a serene young man who sees the best in everyone. Budd's appearance and temperament not only identify him as a type of Handsome Sailor but as a Christ-like figure as well. His beautiful appearance conveys Budd's inner purity, spirituality, and even transcendent otherworldliness. However, equating Billy Budd with the Handsome Sailor also may imply that Budd is as fanciful (nonreal or fictional) a character as the Handsome Sailor of lore is.

Animal Imagery and References

The author sometimes compares characters in the story to animals. In simile and metaphor, characters are likened to different animals to make their characteristics more vivid.

For example, Claggart is sometimes referred to as a serpent. He is also compared to a "scorpion" who stings itself with its own tail to kill whatever good may be hidden within. These animal images make clear Claggart's "evil" nature. When Budd is confronted by the afterguardsman's treachery he is said to react like a "young horse fresh from pasture suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory." The vivid image of the horse conveys Budd's alienation from the evil of men and shows how repellent he, as innocent of evil as a horse, finds it. Throughout the story, animal imagery is used to convey the actions or feelings of various characters.

Homoeroticism

Critics such as American writer Rictor Norton as have detected an undercurrent of homoeroticism in parts of the novel. The other sailors on the ship seek out Budd's company. Although it is stated that this is because Budd is always so cheerful and genial, the sailors' desire for proximity to him may indicate an underlying homosexual attraction.

Both Claggart and Captain Vere may have barely recognized, and certainly unacknowledged, sexual feelings for Budd. It is likely these men are not fully homosexual but instead are so completely drawn to Budd's beauty and goodness their attraction to him has a sexual component to it.

Suggested Reading

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