

Analysis from Cliff Notes

symbol of innocence. Unaware of the evils of life, he is hopelessly unfitted for existence in the world of men.

The comparison of the two irreconcilable parts of Claggart's nature to Chang and Eng, the famous Siamese twins of the nineteenth century who were joined together in life and in death, suggests still another theme to this mysterious and complex tale. The two represent the two sides of the nature of man. Good and evil exist side by side. In one case the heart rules; in the other case the head rules. To be dominated by either one is dangerous. Like Aristotle's golden mean, the mean of these two extremes is to be preferred. Again, this mean may be represented by Captain Vere, in whom the two meet in perfect proportion. He is opposed to innovation and change, not because such tendencies are inimical to the privileged classes to which he belongs, but because "they seemed to him incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." He is truly the balanced man.

Some critics view the story as a commentary on the impersonality and essential brutality of the modern state, exacting the death penalty of the innocent. Billy is doomed through his innate innocence. Melville states: "He had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad." Another theme is the problem of man's place in a hostile universe.

The setting of the novel aboard the *Indomitable* suggests the ship of life, or civilized society, in which innocence is doomed. The sea is the stream upon which mortal life is borne.

Richard Chase reduces the theme to a blunt assertion: "The real theme of *Billy Budd*," he insists, "is castration and cannibalism, the ritual murder and eating of the host."

Others interpreting the theme primarily in terms of satire and irony stress the paradox at the center of the story that the *Rights of Man* cannot operate in the sea of life without the protection of the *Indomitable*, the usurper of those rights. In turn

the *Indomitable* can protect the *Rights* only at the expense of impressing men from the ship it protects. Along the same lines Melville seems to be saying that the common man cannot understand the need for justice to rule in time of revolt.

The hanging of Billy Budd is Melville's final commentary on one theme: the impracticability of absolute standards in a world ruled by expediency. Billy's instinctive affinity for right and justice makes him the personification of natural law. His death means that his standard is unworkable when applied to a complex social relationship.

The frequent allusion to history, and his placing the action in "a crisis of Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record," would indicate that Melville is concerned with the historical development of mankind and sees Christianity as the center of an order which seems to be gradually slipping away. This, as well as the other ideas mentioned above, seems to have been uppermost in his mind as in his declining years he penned this final work, which he dedicated to Jack Chase "wherever that great heart may now be here on earth, or harboured in Paradise." That Melville ever attempted to deal with this problem attests to his greatness.

Focus on Style

STYLE

In almost all respects *Billy Budd* is a typical Melville production. It is a sea story, the author's favorite genre; it treats rebellion, directs attention to needed reforms (impressment), contains rich historical background, abounds in Christian and mythological allusions, concentrates its main action upon actual incidents, and concerns ordinary sailors. Everywhere the style is unmistakably that of Melville. The story is rife with mythic figures, stories, and analogues. So extensive is the use of allusion that *Billy Budd* is inevitably interpreted allegorically.

Although the language is prose, the rhythm often suggests poetry. Figurative speech abounding in metaphors and similes

enriches the meaning as well as the diction of the novel. When Billy is accused by Claggart, he looked "struck as by white leprosy." At Billy's death the sky was "shot through with a soft glory as the fleece of the Lamb of God."

The sentences are long, the chapters short, often producing an impression of completeness. Foreshadowing, suspense, symbolism, irony, poetic diction, suggestive words, digressions, images, and distortions are some of the other techniques and devices which Melville employs to advantage in this short novel. The story develops simply, always unhurriedly, yet the action never lags. Each character is described with patience and care. By making the story so short, Melville has shown himself as a writer at his very best in his deepest, most poetic, and therefore most conscious style.

Most of the writing is exposition. In the novel we are told about the events in their sequential order but from a retrospective point of view rather than by means of the diary type narrative which Melville used in *Typee*. Although the novel is short on dramatic scenes, Melville's power in narrating the single incidents is unsurpassed.

Eager to have the reader believe that both *Typee* and *Billy Budd* are faithful accounts of actual happenings, Melville, after carrying the reader through the story of *Billy Budd* on high notes of some of the most imaginative prose in all of literature, ends the narrative in a matter-of-fact, drab, uninspired journalistic style.

The newspaper account of the so-called mutiny aboard the *Indomitable* is realistic. In its distortion of the fact, we see the reality of our own world. By telling us that the poem, "Billy in the Darbies," was not only published, but that it was published at Portsmouth, and that it was written by a friend of Billy's, a fellow foretopman, Melville jars us awake from our mythic nightmare and assures us that what we are witnessing are the cold facts of reality.

One critic has called the style of *Billy Budd* "the stiff and angular vocabulary of specification" (Warner Berthoff). Melville's style had matured from the flowery and fluid passages in *Typee* to a more dignified and sedate prose in *Billy Budd*. The sentences, long and somber, are packed—almost too full—with information.

The digressions play an important role in the structure and style of the novel. Spaced as they are, they have the same effect as the prophetic sound of the minor chord in the overture of an opera. Used at strategic moments, they often give pertinent background to illuminate a particular event. Melville's suggestive images give depth and scope to the plot and to the characters. His comparing Billy to Adam at one time and to Casper Houser at another time foreshadows the Handsome Sailor's fate. Billy's salutation and valediction to his old ship foreshadow his treatment aboard the *Indomitable*: "And good-bye to you too, old *Rights of Man*." Claggart's character is illumined by an allusion to British history and to the Bible, "The Pharisee is the Guy Fawkes prowling in the hid chambers underlying some natures like Claggart's." In his digression on Admiral Nelson, Melville gives an insight into the character of Captain Vere, his outstanding ability and inflexible nature. By his artistic use of imagery and symbolism Melville gives his characters universality as well as vividness and verisimilitude.

Melville's narrative method in *Billy Budd* involves the technical principle of sustained irony. Irony involves contrast, a discrepancy between the anticipated and the actual. It involves paradox, a statement actually self-contradictory or false. In addition to using irony of statement, Melville also uses irony of situation involving a discrepancy between what we expect the outcome of an action to be—what would seem to be the fitting outcome—and the actual outcome. One critic thinks that Melville cunningly creates the artistic illusion that the narrator in *Billy Budd* sympathizes throughout with the authoritarian viewpoint of Captain Vere when in point of fact he does not (Lawrence Thompson).

Irony is seen throughout the pages of the novel. At the beginning of the novel Billy is taken forcibly from a ship called the *Rights of Man* and is impressed into the British navy. It is one of the paradoxical ironies of the story that the *Rights of Man* cannot operate on the sea unless it is protected by the *Indomitable*, the abridger of those rights. In turn the *Indomitable* can perform its protective function only by taking men by force from the ship which it protects. Billy's cry of "God bless Captain Vere" is a crowning irony. The sailors blessed Billy, not Vere, with Billy's words, "God bless Captain Vere." There is irony in Captain Vere's deathbed utterance, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd." Billy was hanged as a criminal, but was immortalized as a saint. There is irony in the false account in the naval chronicle which sees Billy as the saboteur and Claggart as the savior of the ship. There is irony in the fact that Claggart, desiring Billy's defeat by his false accusation, succeeds in bringing about his own death.

It is ironic, too, that in attempting to clear Billy by confronting him with his tormentor, Captain Vere is instrumental in causing Billy's death. Ironic, also, is the fact that Billy as the Handsome Sailor is perfection personified except for one small blemish, and it is this tragic flaw that brings about his downfall. Until his death Billy is unable to believe that Claggart could wish him harm, for he keeps saying that Claggart has always been kind to him and has always spoken favorably of him. Most ironic of all is the fact that John Claggart, who is generally regarded as the apogee of evil, bears the same initials as Jesus Christ, usually a dead give-away in modern fiction of the Christ-figure (Joe Christmas, Jim Casey, Jim Conklin).

The fact remains, however, that of all stylistic devices which Melville uses so effectively in this novel, the most important is symbolism. The symbols are predominantly biblical. Confused by its complexities and contradictions, Melville pondered all his life on the matter of religion. He annotated with constant care his copy of the New Testament. In all of his writing except a few short pieces echoes of the Bible can be heard. Statistics have been compiled to show that in *Billy Budd* alone there are some hundred allusions and twenty-two direct references to the Bible.

Frequently in his prose he even uses biblical phrasing. Foremost among the symbols are those of Christ and the Crucifixion, with Billy serving as Melville's Christ. Billy is not perfect, however, since he has a flaw—a stammer—which may be interpreted as symbolic of original sin. In spite of the defect, however, Billy's character conveys the idea that his soul belongs to the heavenly and not to the earthly world, and this is readily apparent to the chaplain of the *Indomitable*.

Billy has also been seen as Adam before the fall. He is compared with the Christian hero who, through resignation to his fate, finds solace in a heavenly reward. His innate goodness make him Christ-like. He is a peacemaker, and is so labeled by the good captain of the *Rights of Man*. Like Jesus, the young sailor hesitates to defend himself before the judges, and like Him alone with his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, Billy has his moment with Captain Vere in the cabin before his death.

At the trial Billy's purity of conscience cannot be considered; he is convicted solely for his unremediated act. His fate is similar to the one Jesus suffered. Under strict codes, the Mosaic Law and the Mutiny Act, the two were condemned to death. The courts that try them realize that the charge is only superficial. Billy dies with a prayer upon his lips, as did Jesus. Billy's prayer is, "God bless Captain Vere!"

At Billy's death all nature is affected, and the appearance of the sea and sky is phenomenal. In Melville's beautiful description of the sky is the suggestion of both the Ascension and the doctrine of the Atonement: "At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot through with a soft glory as the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision; and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn."

Another unnatural, awe-inspiring act occurs when Billy, wrapped in his sailor's hammock, is buried at sea. "A second strange human murmur was heard—blended now with another

inarticulate sound proceeding from certain larger sea-fowl... [that] flew screaming to the spot.... As the ship under light airs passed on, leaving the burial spot astern, they still kept circling it low down with the moving shadow of their outstretched wings and the cracked requiem of their cries."

To strengthen the Crucifixion image even further, at the end of the novel, Melville writes that of the spar from which Billy was hanged even a chip of it was to the sailors "as a piece of the Cross." Billy's influence and significance are even more keenly felt after his death.

Captain Vere, whose name means truth, corresponds to the God-the-Father concept of the Crucifixion story. He has been seen by some scholars to represent Divine Justice and by others to personify Cosmic Tyranny. God himself, however, was willing for Jesus to die. Vere, in administering the law, is likewise bound by it. Too, he resembles Pontius Pilate, in that he condemns to death a man whom he feels to be innocent; unlike Pontius Pilate he does not wash his hands of the matter. According to the apocryphal story, the death of Jesus haunted Pilate to his own death. He lived out his last years as praetor to Hispania Tarraconensis. Nearby is Gibraltar, where Vere dies as he utters the name of Billy Budd. His ship, the *Indomitable*, has just conquered the French man-of-war *Atheiste*. Vere has also been seen as Abraham to Billy's Isaac. In the scene in which Billy confronts Claggart and is accused, he is comforted by the captain, who urges him to take his time in replying. This fatherliness so deeply touches Billy's heart that his face becomes, as Melville states, "a crucifixion to behold."

Again when Vere visits Billy before the execution, the reader can only surmise what takes place, but Melville implies there is sympathy, love, and respect between the two men. They meet as equals, evidently conceal nothing, and in a peculiar sense become one being. "The austere devotee of military duty, letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in the end have caught Billy to his heart." Billy's sole concern has been to rectify himself in the

eyes of the captain. When he accomplishes this goal, he is wholly without irrational qualms concerning death. The chaplain, visiting him later, finds him possessed of such an astonishing and ineffable peace that he slips away, feeling no need for giving spiritual consolation.

In a Christian frame of reference the spiritual antithesis of Billy Budd is Claggart, symbolically Judas Iscariot, or the serpent in the Garden of Eden, another Ananias, or Satan himself. When Claggart is felled by Billy's reflex blow, Captain Vere exclaims, "It is the divine judgment on Ananias!" A moment later he exclaims, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"

Even in death, Claggart is serpentine. When Captain Vere and Billy attempt to lift it, the "spare form flexibly acquiesced, but inertly. It was like handling a dead snake." This strangely cold and calculating accuser has destroyed himself just as Judas had done.

Melville uses color symbolically in this novel. He pits the blond Billy against the black-haired Claggart. He speaks of the rose-red hue of Billy's complexion and of the sallowness of Claggart's. Billy lives in the light of the upper deck, while Claggart lurks in a dark and forbidding world below. Good and evil are thus reflected through an adroit manipulation of color.