

Billy Budd, Foretopman by Herman Melville [Plot Summary]

Author: Herman Melville

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Plot

The novella begins in 1797 aboard the British merchant ship *Rights-of-Man*, which is returning to England after a long journey. The vessel is stopped by a British warship, the H.M.S. *Indomitable*, whose crew wishes to impress sailors for service into the British navy (this method of forcibly acquiring sailors was deemed necessary during the war England was then waging against France). The sailor who is chosen to join the *Indomitable's* crew is Billy Budd, a good-looking, hardworking, peacemaking young man who is much liked by everyone. He does not seem to mind sailing back out to sea on the *Indomitable*, and he settles in well with his new shipmates, with one notable exception: the master-of-arms John Claggert. Budd gradually suspects that Claggert has some grudge against him. The old sailor Dansker confirms that Claggert does indeed hate Budd, but cannot explain why. Claggert tries to hide his enmity, however, carrying out his antagonism toward Budd through his subordinates. A troublemaking crewman offers Budd money to join a group planning to mutiny, but Budd disgustedly rejects the proposal. However, Claggert reports to Captain Vere that Budd has been trying to foment a mutiny. The captain, who believes Budd is innocent, brings both Claggert and Budd to his cabin to discuss the accusation; Budd is so profoundly upset that he is unable to speak. In frustration, he punches Claggert in the face and the man falls down and dies. Though distraught because of his fondness for Budd and his belief in his innocence, Vere feels compelled by the need for strict discipline during wartime to call a drumhead court-martial to try Budd for murder. There is no alternative but for the three-man court to find Budd guilty and condemn him to be hanged from the yardarm the next morning. Everyone aboard the *Indomitable* is grief-stricken but Budd does not seem resentful. As he is about to be hanged, Budd calls out "God bless Captain Vere!" Some time later, Vere is mortally wounded in a battle, and he is heard to murmur the young sailor's name as he lays dying. The yardarm from which Budd's body swung is for years after his death an object of reverence to the sailors, who regard it almost as they would a cross.

Characters

Published several decades after Melville's death, *Billy Budd* features the dramatic ocean setting of most of his other works and centers on a typically Melvillian theme: the conflict between good and evil. The critic Carl Van Doren wrote that in this novel Melville was "no longer asking himself ... why evil should exist, he asks instead how it moves on its horrid errands and what is to be done about it." Some scholars have focused on the political and historical aspects of *Billy Budd*, interpreting it as an exploration of the extremities of punishment and sacrifice necessary during wartime.

The title character is a remarkably handsome twenty-one-year-old sailor whose good looks are augmented by a loyal, likeable, cheerful nature. Many critics, noting **Billy Budd's** virtuousness, peacemaking ability, forgiveness of Vere before his death, and the many Biblical references in the book, characterize him as a Christ figure. Symbolically, Budd is "crucified" on the yardarm; that his body never twitches as it swings aloft suggests some kind of divine intervention. Budd has also been said to embody the primitive innocence of Adam, and like that first man he is a victim of evil--personified not by a serpent but by Claggert. Budd's only imperfection is the stammer that afflicts him when he is nervous or upset, and it is this flaw which not only gives him his humanity but brings about his downfall. Budd's essential passivity is exemplified by his easy acceptance when he is impressed onto the *Indomitable* and is most dramatically expressed when he blesses the captain just before he is hanged. Even Budd's one act of violence--striking out at Claggert--could be viewed as passive since it leads directly to his ultimate submission to the authority that rules over him. The fact that Budd, an ideal person, is sacrificed, weighs heavily upon the crew and humanity in general; such sacrifices, Melville implies, are often unavoidable if the greater order of civilization is to be maintained.

Though **Captain Vere's** tendency toward thoughtfulness and brooding earned him the appellation "Starry" Vere among his men, he is a serious, intellectual man who values directness and honesty. Critics have often described Vere as a balance between Budd's goodness and Claggert's evil, and as such he is a more realistic character than either of them. He develops a great affection for Budd and fully recognizes his virtues, but Vere's commitment to duty and his sense of responsibility will not permit him to save Budd's life. Instead, he feels compelled to act according to the principals established by the authorities he represents, and he interprets those principals as demanding Budd's execution. That Vere is profoundly affected by Budd's death is apparent, for he stands as if paralyzed when Budd calls out his blessing, and the last words the captain speaks before dying are the young man's name. Critics have been divided in their response to Vere. Some feel that Melville condones his action, which is prompted by the necessities of war, thus making Budd an example of the toll that war takes on humanity. Other scholars claim that Vere takes his responsibility too literally, that he acts too quickly when he might have prevented Budd's death. In keeping with the novel's Biblical tone, Vere might be said to resemble Pontius Pilate, who also unwillingly condemned an innocent man, with the important difference that the captain accepts responsibility for what he has done, even meeting privately with Budd to--presumably--discuss his decision.

The villain of *Billy Budd*, **John Claggert**, a tall, thin, thirty-five-year-old with pale skin and dark hair, is the ship's keeper of weapons. Little is known of his early life--adding to the ominous mysteriousness that surrounds his character. Melville portrays Claggert's wickedness as innate and fated rather than informed by any reasonable circumstances. He hates Budd because the young sailor is so good, so beautiful, so innocent. He is subtle in his actions, preferring to antagonize Budd through his subordinates rather than directly, but he is also courageous, for falsely accusing someone of mutiny could cost one his own life. He seems almost as much a victim of the evil inside him as Budd is--certainly he pays the same price for it when he falls down dead after making his deceitful accusation. He observes that he might actually have loved Budd if not for the inescapable hate he bears him; this has caused some critics to see Claggert's resentment as prompted by his own homosexual desire. Several scholars have compared Claggert to the Biblical figure of Judas in his betrayal of the innocent Christ, while others have noted his resemblance to the character of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*, whose jealousy leads to evildoing.

Other characters in *Billy Budd* include **the Dansker**, the cynical old sailor who likes Budd so much he calls him "Baby" and who informs him of Claggert's enmity, and **the Afterguardsman**, the troublemaker commissioned by Claggert to entice Budd to join a mutiny.

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