

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

Billy Budd (1891)



Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

TEXT

When he died in 1891, Melville left the manuscript of *Billy Budd* in a desk, covered with revisions. Since its discovery and first publication in 1924, it has been edited and re-edited by scholars who have interpreted the revisions differently. Consequently there are competing texts. In some, Vere's warship is called the *Bellipotent* and in others the *Indomitable*. Because editors have separated and numbered chapters differently, in some places hereafter, two numbers are given for the same chapters.

These differences are not significant enough to affect interpretations of the novella. Only one is very important: Most editors accept the Preface, but a few do not. Without the Preface, this extremely subtle work becomes even more subtle. Including the Preface clarifies Melville's perspective: The analogies in the Preface support the decision made by Captain Vere that Billy Budd must hang. Naturally, the many critics and readers who oppose Captain Vere are inclined to omit more evidence against their perspective.

NAMES

The common name Billy suggests a boy or young man. He is so immature in the sense of naive, he is also known as "Baby Budd." The name Budd suggests the bud of a flower yet to blossom--pastoral values of the heart. Budd also evokes gods: (1) The most important Celtic god was Hu, the Celtic Apollo, also known as Beli and Budd; and (2) the Buddhist god also was called Budd. Melville's dedication to his shipmate suggests that Jack Chase could have been a real life model for Billy, giving his mythic narrative an origin in fact, and in personal as well as world history. Captain "Starry" Vere's name is apt because (1) he must veer from his desire and even love for Billy in condemning him to death; (2) Vere suggests *veritas*, Latin for truth; and (3) "Starry" Vere suggests that he embodies a higher or transcendent truth that differs from popular opinion or desire, as represented by everyone else on board.

“INSIDE NARRATIVE”

Melville calls *Billy Budd* “an inside narrative”—that is to say, a psychological allegory like *Moby-Dick*, in which, in the figurative dimension, the main characters personify aspects of one psyche—Ishmael’s. In *Billy Budd* the psyche is transpersonal and archetypal, hence universal. The complexity, profundity, transcendent quality and dramatic power of the multiple allegories make *Billy Budd* “great” in aesthetic terms:

MULTIPLE ALLEGORIES

1. Billy Budd is every innocent initiated into evil
2. The child in everyone must die for survival in the adult world
3. The naive heart is destroyed by the calculating egocentric head
4. A Christ-evoking figure crucified for others becomes a legend

Melville learned from reading Hawthorne’s allegories how to clarify and perfect his own, a debt he acknowledged by dedicating *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne. The psychological allegory of symbols is a literary form that emerged from the medieval tradition of dream allegory, as represented by Dante. Far from dream, Melville’s allegory here is conveyed in the empirical tone of objective history, giving it authority and a greater tragic resonance.

PREFACE

He opens by setting the scene: a “crisis of Christendom.” France and Britain are at war. The recent French Revolution was a “political advance.” However, “Straightaway the Revolution itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the kings.” British sailors “caught” the contagious “Revolutionary Spirit” and rose up “against real abuses, long-standing ones”—but then, at Nore, they went on “to make inordinate and aggressive demands—successful resistance to which was confirmed *only* when the ringleaders were hung for an admonitory spectacle to the anchored fleet. Yet, in a way analogous to the operation of the Revolution at large, the Great Mutiny, though...deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms.” (italics added)

ANALOGIES

The opening analogy between the French Revolution and the British Mutiny introduces the story of a subsequent British mutiny implicitly analogous to the first two uprisings. According to the logic of analogy, the mutiny now stirring on the *Indomitable* is like a contagious disease because most of the needed reforms have already been made in the British Navy and another mutiny now—in the midst of a war—would endanger the fleet, the country and all of “Christendom.” Since the Great Mutiny was stopped “only when the ringleaders were hung,” by analogy the subsequent mutiny can *only* be stopped by a hanging.

Melville knows people are inclined to read with their hearts, that young readers in particular will identify with “innocent” Billy against Captain Vere. It would have been so easy to cater to the popular lust for rebellion against authority, but Melville is not politically correct. He wrote against the tilt of most readers, just as Vere paces against the tilt of the ship when he argues at the court martial. The revisions to the manuscript as it developed indicate that Melville kept making additions favorable to Vere, hoping to persuade readers to transcend their initial feelings and *think*. If they do, if they read carefully enough, if they enlarge their perspective beyond Billy as Starry Vere had to do, they will come to share Melville’s tragic vision.

Chapter 1

Many are killed unjustly in wars and many sacrifice themselves for others. Billy is both common enough to be representative and exceptional enough to become a tragic hero and even a god: He is the legendary Handsome Sailor and is compared to Apollo for his beauty, to Hercules for his good-natured strength and to Achilles for his vulnerability—his innocence, which renders him incapable of coping with

evil. "Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company." When he is drafted into service aboard the warship *Indomitable*, Billy is also a Christ-evoking figure aboard the Rights of Man: "Well, blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting peacemakers!"

Captain Vere and his crew are fighting peacemakers too--at war, where the stakes are highest. While his shipmaster protests that his best man is being taken, Billy accepts being forced into the war with an "uncomplaining acquiescence, all but cheerful one might say." This prefigures his later acceptance of his hanging, as Melville continues to unify his narrative with analogies: The shipmaster of the peaceful Rights of Man is analogous in character to Captain Vere of the warship, the devilish Red Whiskers is a milder version of Claggart--both of them dislike Billy "out of envy, perhaps"--and both ships lose their best man.

Further, when Billy submits to the military and bids goodbye to the Rights of Man, he is unconscious of the irony, for he is "by no means of a satirical turn. The will to it and the sinister dexterity were alike wanting." Billy is a fatalist, "like the animals." His characterization as "Baby Budd" makes it impossible to interpret him as sarcastic when he cries out before hanging, "God bless Captain Vere!"

2

There are no "rights of man" in war. War is the horrific opposite of equitable society. And war is the way of the world. "To one essentially such a novice in the complexities of factitious life, the abrupt transition from his former and simpler sphere to the ampler and more knowing world of a great warship--this might well have abashed him." The Rights of Man represents the limited sphere of lawful society, which exists only so long as it is defended by the *Indomitable* out in the boundless sphere of Wilderness where British rights are being threatened by France. A peacetime sailor, Billy has no experience in war. The warship is the "more knowing world" where he must become a "man-of-war-man."

Readers and critics who identify with "innocent" Billy and condemn Captain Vere for his "injustice" argue from their hearts within the sphere of rights in a lawful society. Unlike Billy, they refuse to be impressed by Vere (truth). They refuse to accept, even in imagination, the "more knowing world" represented by the warship. From where they stand, on the Rights of Man, "innocent" Billy does no wrong. Like Billy, or Baby Budd, they have "not yet been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge." Since Billy is an Adam, we anticipate his fall. He has "one thing amiss"--his stutter, which is compared to the birthmark in Hawthorne's story, an imperfection that both writers associate with the innate human tendency to sin--even Billy Budd. This imperfection "should be evidence not alone that he is not presented as a conventional hero, but also that the story in which he is the main figure is no romance."

3

In April 1797 "occurred the commotion at Spithead, followed in May by a second and yet more serious outbreak in the fleet at Nore. The latter is known, and without exaggeration in the epithet, as the Great Mutiny"--"what a strike in the fire brigade would be to London threatened by general arson"--"irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames." The mutineers made demands "not only inadmissible but aggressively insolent... To some extent the Nore Mutiny may be regarded as *analogous* to the distempering irruption of contagious fever"....

4

Admiral Nelson, victor over Napoleon at Trafalgar, is presented as a famous hero, the greatest in British Naval history, a leader who could put down a mutiny on his ship "by force of his mere presence." Melville's purpose in introducing Nelson is to contrast Captain Vere, who has no such charisma and must rely on his judgment. Both are killed in battle. Nelson stands atop a column in Trafalgar Square in London, whereas Vere is one of those unknown heroes far more numerous in any war.

“Yes, the outbreak at the Nore was put down. But not every grievance was redressed... Discontent foreran the two mutinies, and more or less it lurkingly survived them. Hence it was not *unreasonable* to apprehend some return of trouble sporadic or general” (italics added). That is, it is reasonable of Captain Vere to anticipate another mutiny and to take what actions are necessary to prevent it. “At short notice an engagement might come on.” When they do engage the enemy, “in some instances” the lieutenants have to intimidate the gunners with drawn swords.

Captain Vere is thoughtful and modest and not a military “type.” He was promoted for gallantry, is very experienced in war and “*always* acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline...intrepid to the verge of temerity, though *never injudiciously* so.” (Italics added) He has never been injudicious. If he is wrong in judging that Billy must hang, it is the only mistake in his career.

Melville continues to differentiate Captain Vere from military stereotypes and to commend him: “He had a marked leaning toward everything intellectual. He loved books” and he has a “serious mind of superior order.” His independence of mind is evident in his preference for “unconventional writers” like Montaigne, who “honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities.” Montaigne was one of Melville’s favorite writers. In fact, Melville resembles Vere in being “as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as that he would cite from the moderns.” Like Melville, he has historical perspective, is prone to “remote allusions” and crosses the frontiers of thought.

John Claggart the master-at-arms is a sort of policeman with the duty of preserving order. He looks educated and out of place, “like a man of high quality, social and moral, who for reasons of his own was keeping incog.” He may have committed “some mysterious swindle” and have “found in the navy a convenient and secure refuge.” He has “jet curls” and a “pallor”--black and white--a polarized and polarizing figure who destroys the order on board rather than preserving it. His complexion “seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal.” He patrols the lower decks and has an “underground influence” through his subordinate corporals.

Billy Budd the topman is high above Claggart, enjoying himself until he witnesses a flogging below him. Then the corporals of the lower decks begin secretly messing up his belongings to get him in trouble. He consults the cynical old Dansker, who served under Nelson, again encouraging a comparison with Vere. The scarred old veteran warns him about Claggart, “He’s down on you, Baby Budd.”

At dinner, when Billy accidentally spills his soup, Claggart “playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan,” with an “involuntary smile, or rather grimace.” Playfully. From behind (Billy is seated). If, as many politically correct critics infer, Claggart has a homosexual attraction to Billy, perhaps ambivalent or frustrated, that would explain his unusual interest at the literal level. After all, Melville writes that Claggart “was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself...” [italics added]. In *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael and Queequeg are squeezing spermaceti together, Melville implies that the bisexuality of some other sailors while at sea is harmless and temporary.

In *Billy Budd*, if it is homosexuality that is motivating Claggart, then that causes the tragedy. The critics who insist that Claggart is gay disregard the fact that he is “depraved” and identified with Satan. Unintentionally, they turn the story into an argument against gays in the military. The position of Claggart in this scene conveys figuratively that he is doing things behind Billy’s back in a moral sense--that he is ordering his corporals to get Billy in trouble.

Melville himself answers the question of what is motivating Claggart: “What can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound, such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself.” This says that Claggart feels *antipathy* not attraction, called forth by “harmlessness.” There is more in the next chapter about “what it was that had first moved him against Billy, namely, his significant personal beauty. Now envy and antipathy.”

Claggart exemplifies “‘Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature.’ A definition which, though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin’s dogmas as to total mankind. Evidently its intent makes it applicable but to individuals.” Claggart folds himself “in the mantle of respectability,” is “dominated by intellectuality” and has “a phenomenal pride.” He is mad with “the mania of an evil nature” that is “born with him and innate”: “Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound.” Like a Nazi, for example. Melville here concurs with the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, as to *some* individuals. Obviously not Billy, for example. This differs from Hawthorne, who absolutely rejected the doctrine. Most of Hawthorne’s villains are intellectual like Claggart—usually physicians or scientists—but they are not born evil, they like all humans have a “tendency” to sin. The villains become dissociated from their hearts and “the spiritual part dies out” in them.

12/13

Claggart is comparable to Lucifer envying Adam and Christ in *Paradise Lost* by Milton. He is identified with the head, an intellectual dissociated from the heart and polarized against it, whereas Billy is identified with the innocent heart. The innocence of Baby Budd is a “moral phenomenon” that Claggart understands. He has a “disdain of innocence,” just as many academics—liberal professors in particular—feel superior to people they consider uneducated or stupid.

13/14

One of Claggart’s “more cunning corporals” below decks is Squeak, who is compared to “a rat in a cellar.” Squeak is adept at perverting information about Billy and inventing negative quotations, like many a journalist. Feeding the vindictive passion of his boss, Squeak invents epithets directed against him by the crew. “And the retaliation is apt to be in monstrous disproportion to the supposed offense.... Claggart’s conscience, being but the lawyer to his will, made ogres of trifles,” justifying animosity “into a sort of retributive righteousness” that drives his “clandestine persecution of Billy.”

14/15

Billy is depicted as literally as well as figuratively asleep. He gets called aside by a whispering stranger who tries to persuade him to join a gang of impressed sailors, implicitly plotting an uprising—“Couldn’t you--help--at a pinch?” The loyal Billy stutters and threatens to throw the plotter overboard. The man disappears and Billy is questioned about the incident by two forecandlemen including Red Pepper, a name recalling Red Whiskers.

15/16

Now Billy loses his innocence. He implicates himself when he decides not to be an informer on his shipmates and keeps the subversive incident to himself, except in consulting the old Dansker, who warns him again that Claggart is out to get him: “Didn’t I say so, Baby Budd?”

16/17

Despite these warnings from the wise old man, Billy is such a “child-man” he is more blind than Captain Delano in *Benito Cereno*, who is portrayed as a typical American liberal. Billy the Brit cannot recognize evil in Claggart because “he had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not

good or incompletely so foreruns experience.” And further, “as a class, sailors are in character a juvenile race more especially holding true with the sailors of Billy’s time.”

17/18

Claggart watches Billy “with a settled meditative and melancholy expression” and “a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban.” Billy “thought the master-at-arms acted in a manner rather queer at times. That was all.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word *queer* was not used to mean homosexual until 1922. In the allegories, Claggart’s “soft yearning” is not toward Billy’s body, but toward what Billy embodies in Melville’s allegories--innocence and beauty. Further, unlike today, in the 19th century a man could express love for another man without being suspected of homosexuality.

Melville’s emphasis on Claggart’s intellect and his understanding of Billy’s moral significance indicate that he is aware of his own evil and that he is doomed. “Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows.” Claggart like Christ? By now the reader has reduced Billy and Claggart to Good and Evil. All at once Melville reverses them as if contradicting his previous narrative. However, events to come disclose why, in the allegories, both Billy and Claggart must die. Billy remains oblivious, as “innocence was his blinder.” Meanwhile the monomania of Claggart “like a subterranean fire was eating its way deeper and deeper in him. Something decisive must come of it.”

19

The *Indomitable* is selected for an important mission in part because “the character of her commander [Vere], it was thought, specially adapted him for any duty where under unforeseen difficulties a prompt initiative might have to be taken.” In hanging Billy to put down a potential mutiny, Vere takes exactly the sort of “prompt initiative” he was selected and ordered to take.

Alone and vulnerable at some distance from the fleet, the *Indomitable* is sighted and gets chased by an enemy ship. Claggart takes advantage of the dangerous situation to approach Captain Vere and accuse an unnamed sailor of being a “dangerous character in a ship mustering some who not only had taken a guilty part in the late serious trouble, but also others.” Captain Vere chides him for not being direct. Claggart proceeds with more indirection, leading to the assertion that a mutiny may be underway. Vere is angered by this, “instinctively divining” the truth, that Claggart is about to invoke the Great Mutiny at Nore. This demonstrates the accuracy of Vere’s intuition as a “divining.”

“Captain Vere did not permit himself to be unduly disturbed by the general tenor of his subordinate’s report.” Instead, he exercises restraint and displays his judicious temperament in a paragraph of objective analysis and “intentional surmise.” Vere (truth) has the intuition Billy lacks, combined with the capacity for objectivity, both sensibility and sense as Jane Austen would say: he has a synergistic mind and holistic perception. He is astonished when Claggart lies, naming Billy as “dangerous,” claiming that Budd resents his impressment. Vere has seen Billy as like “young Adam before the Fall.” Challenged to be specific, Claggart alleges “certain words and acts...inculpating Budd.” Vere exhibits judicious caution again in his response, his instructions to Claggart.

19/20

Discretely bringing the accuser and the accused into his cabin, Vere orders Claggart to repeat his accusation to Billy’s face--which he does. Billy “stood like one impaled and gagged.” Claggart’s “first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish.” The word “serpent” identifies Claggart with evil again, as a virtual Satan.

Vere orders Billy to defend himself. For most of one page, in shock, Baby Budd can only “gurgle” and “struggle against suffocation...bringing to his face an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold.” Billy is first “crucified” in his own heart by the false allegation of Claggart, which will hang him due to his innocence. *Billy Budd* is full of such ironies that increase its complexity and intellectual power. Unable to

cope with such evil by peaceful means, Billy can only defend himself with violence, like the British Navy now at war: "quick as the flame from a discharged cannon" his right hand "shot out."

Billy strikes back at Claggart, who hits his head and dies. Because Billy is good and Claggart is evil, the killing feels good and just. But think about it. This is a warship in immediate danger of encountering the enemy. In the midst of this crisis, Billy kills the master-at-arms, who represents order on the ship--the "most heinous" of crimes. Billy is already a hero to the crew. His killing of Claggart would be popular. As soon as it becomes known, it could incite a mutiny: "'Fated boy,' breathed Captain Vere... 'What have you done!'"

When they move the body, "It was like handling a dead snake"--a simile that evokes Christ as the killer of Satan. Vere's feelings for Billy are paternal until he must act as captain of a warship: "The father in him, manifested toward Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the disciplinarian." After the surgeon confirms the death, Vere exclaims, "Struck dead by the angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Melville has repeatedly attributed to Vere an intuitive capacity that he implies is transcendent or "Starry" by calling it "divining." Vere "divines" the tragedy as a whole, foreseeing the meaning of it all: Billy is like an angel of God in striking down Satan, but now, unjustly, he must also be sacrificed like Christ, for the sake of Christendom.

20/21

The surgeon does not know what happened and hence does not understand the reasons for a drumhead court. Noticing Vere's agitation he jumps to the speculation that the Captain might be "unhinged"--a notion that would be provocative to the crew. The doctor and the lieutenants think Vere should delay. They all agree on passing the buck, that "such a matter should be referred to the admiral." On the contrary, the reader should recall that Vere was selected for this mission on the basis of his ability to act with "prompt initiative" and he was ordered to do so.

Physicians are usually thought to be objective--though not always reliable, as in some of Hawthorne's fictions--but this ship's doctor is injudicious, unlike Vere has proved himself to be. Melville has given sufficient evidence of Vere's stability, caution and mental capacity that the surgeon's notion that he could be insane should be recognized by the reader as absurd. Insanity was a touchy subject with Melville. He was accused of insanity by members of his own family.

21/22

The surgeon represents the unjust critics of Captain Vere and of Melville--ignorant and presumptuous. The previous chapter and the following passage are devoted to impeaching the surgeon's credibility: "In some *supposed* cases [of insanity], in various degrees *supposedly* less pronounced, to draw the exact line of demarcation few will undertake--though for a fee some professional experts will undertake to do it for pay. Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon *professionally* and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford." (italics added)

This passage illuminates the surgeon as pretentious and self-serving, for the tone of Melville's phrase "professional experts" is contemptuous. The surgeon is close to inciting a mutiny. "That the unhappy event...could not have happened at a worse juncture was but too true. For it was close on the heel of the suppressed insurrections, an aftertime very critical to naval authority, demanding from every English sea commander two qualities not readily interfusible--prudence and rigor." In the end, after due consideration by Vere, both prudence and rigor dictate the necessity of hanging Billy: "In a legal view the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless; and the indisputable deed of the latter, navally regarded, constituted the most heinous of military crimes." The "*most heinous!*"

In this tragedy, justice is the reverse of the law. The reader wants justice, but the captain of a warship "was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis." Ironically, what could be more primitive than war? Yet this war is a necessary defense of western civilization against the primitivism of

radical France. Justice to Billy demands that he live, but that could incite a worse injustice, a mutiny jeopardizing the lives of his shipmates--in fact of all Christendom.

Vere is so judicious he feels "that circumspectness not less than promptitude was necessary." Prudently, he decides to keep the tragedy a secret until he makes his final decision. "Here he may or may not have erred.... Some imaginative ground for invidious comment there was." Vere considers doing as the surgeon and the lieutenants advocate and turn Billy over to the Admiral, "But a true military officer" has an allegiance to duty, though he would much rather not have to make this decision and subject himself to "the perils of moral responsibility."

Unless "quick action was taken," rumors and the absence of Claggart and Billy "would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew...[hence] a sense of the urgency of the case overruled in Captain Vere every other consideration." Accordingly, he convenes a summary court of his officers. In his testimony, Billy is straightforward until asked "whether he knew of or suspected aught savoring of incipient trouble" (meaning mutiny) going on. Now he is forced to make a choice that, whatever he chooses, will further cost him his innocence in a moral sense. "The same erring sense of uninstructed honor which had stood in the way of his reporting the matter at the time though as a loyal man-of-war-man it was incumbent on him, and failure so to do if charged against him and proven, would have subjected him to the heaviest of penalties [death]--this, with the *blind feeling* now his, that nothing was being hatched, prevailed with him." (italics added)

Billy is more loyal to his shipmates than to naval law, deciding with his heart and not using his head. If he had reported the first instance, an investigation by Vere would have exposed Claggart, precluding the tragedy. Again against his own interest, he makes a choice out of goodhearted innocence and "blind feeling," which lead him to commit two crimes and now a third. Adam learned from his Fall. Billy is no longer innocent in a moral sense and his Fall is most dramatic when it breaks his neck, but in understanding what it means he is an innocent to the end.

Unlike the charismatic Admiral Nelson, Captain Vere must persuade his officers: "Turning, he to-and-fro paced the cabin athwart, in the returning ascent to windward climbing the slant deck in the ship's lee roll, without knowing it symbolizing thus in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea." Vere paces against the tilt of his literal ship, just as he does against the tilt of his officers and crew, all of whom instinctively favor delay and justice to Billy. It is a "clash of military duty with moral scruple": "How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?... The exceptional in the matter moves the hearts within you. Even so too is mine moved. But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool.... Budd's intent or nonintent is nothing to the purpose."

Vere points out that, "to the people the foretopman's deed, however it be worded in the announcement, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny." They know the penalty. If it is not imposed, the crew will feel emboldened by the perceived weakness and even cowardice of the officers and Captain. Melville compares the case of the U.S. brig-of-war Somers, in which three sailors were executed in peacetime, whereas the *Indomitable* is engaged in a war for all Christendom. Melville further supports Vere against critics of his decision who have never been in the military, let alone had the responsibility of leading men in combat: "It is easy for a noncombatant to reason" about "emergencies...when *it is imperative promptly to act*" but it is "another thing personally and under fire to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it." (italics added)

22/23

Suffering "the agony of the strong," Vere visits Billy in irons and informs him of the verdict. Melville compares him to "Billy's father," then again, suggesting that Vere "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." But in the end, God did not require Abraham to kill his son, whereas Vere is forced by circumstances to execute his virtual son. Those critics who argue that Melville condemns Vere for

condemning Billy disregard evidence such as his exaltation of them *both* in this chapter as “two of great Nature’s nobler order.”

They “embrace” and Billy forgives the Captain: “That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated by the former’s exclamation in the scene soon perform to be touched upon.” Despite their embrace--the indication that Billy is sincere in his last words forgiving Vere--despite Melville’s prior statement that Billy is “by no means” capable of irony (Chapter 1), and despite all the evidence of his simple nature, some critics of Vere maintain that Billy’s last declaration is sarcastic.

23/24

Once again, in telling the assembled crew of the dire event and its consequence, Vere is wise: He reads the crew accurately, he exercises restraint and he “refrained from making the occasion an opportunity for any preachment as to the maintenance of discipline.”

“Their captain’s announcement was listened to by the throng of standing sailors in a dumbness like that of a seated congregation of believers in hell listening to the clergyman’s announcement of his Calvinistic text.” Melville has already expressed belief in the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity with respect to some individuals like Claggart but not “as to total mankind” (Chapter 11). Here he implies that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination applies to the tragedy of Billy Budd, though by what in *Moby-Dick* he calls “chance, free will and necessity” interwoven on the loom of time by Nature, rather than by a Calvinist God who promised to save a few souls in the end. All aboard are now in hell one way or another thanks to Claggart/Satan--and to Baby Billy.

24/25

Billy clad all in white “more or less soiled,” lies in irons among guns and carriages and equipment all painted black, like “discolored” snow at a cave’s “black mouth.” The white and black imagery emphasize the thematic polarities of the situation, in particular Good versus necessary Evil and “soiled” innocence versus the dark imperatives of war. Billy’s “agony mainly proceed [ed] from a generous young heart’s virgin experience of the diabolical incarnate and effective in some men--the tension of that agony was over now,” because there was a “healing in his closeted interview with Captain Vere.” After their embrace, Billy is like a “slumbering child in the cradle,” a baby Adam who will never outlive his Fall. Vere gives him absolution and peace, like a fatherly priest.

The superceded Chaplain finds Billy asleep and “had no consolation to proffer which could result in a peace transcending that which he beheld... Equally futile to all appearance were his [later] efforts to bring home to him the thought of salvation and a Savior.” Ironic, since Billy is the savior here, sacrificed to preserve Christendom. Melville depicts Vere with his transcendent “Starry” synthesis of head and heart and his tragic vision as more effectual in this world than Christianity as represented by the Chaplain. He ends the chapter by calling attention to the hypocrisy of the Chaplain as a “minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War... He lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force.” Billy likewise sanctions his own crucifixion in his role analogous to Christ, but in the tragic real world of Vere (Truth). Ironically, the unchristian man-of-war-man sacrifices himself for the sake of Christendom.

25/26

“God bless Captain Vere!” Thereby he saves his shipmates, unifying them with faith in Vere, precluding a deadly mutiny that might have sunk them all, were they to encounter the enemy in the midst of it. And “with one voice from aloft and aloft came a resonant sympathetic echo—‘God bless Captain Vere!’” Billy is hung from the cross of the main mast as “the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of 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.”

It is one of the most poignant scenes in literature and especially powerful and moving on film. The passage is full of diction and imagery evoking the crucifixion--*cross, fleece, glory, mystical, East, Lamb of God* and *ascended*. The contrasts are significant too, as Melville does not believe in an afterlife. Billy ascends in a literal sense, in a moral sense, and in the sense of being elevated into legend and myth. The emphatic analogy between Billy and Christ, after the one between Claggart and Satan, casts Vere the father figure, against his will, in the role of Pilate (pilot), representing the British King in the allegorical role of God. The analogy to the crucifixion implies that Billy likewise must be crucified. This is the most obvious evidence vindicating Vere.

26/27

As often in Melville, the style changes from dramatic, poetic and mystical to discursive, literal and scientific. The Purser and the surgeon discuss the peculiar fact that the hanging body of Billy did not convulse: "to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the ship's motion..." The lack of convulsion suggests peaceful acquiescence and the supernatural. Billy's noble sacrifice is Melville's tribute to all those who give their lives for others in wars, most in obscurity. Billy Budd is an apotheosis of common heroes.

The Purser is a "rotund person more accurate as an accountant than profound as a philosopher." The surgeon has been discredited in Chapters 20/21 and 21/22, where he does not know what is going on, yet jumps to an absurd conclusion that could incite a mutiny. When the Purser questions him, once again the surgeon does not know what happened: "I do not, with my present knowledge, pretend to account for it at all." The doctor exhibits the limitations of science, deduction and pure reason, like Dr. Battius in Cooper's *The Prairie*, who can't find his own ass in the dark, and like doctors and scientists in Hawthorne. His diction and tone are pedantic. He compares Billy's heart to a watch and--the opposite of Melville--he scorns the "metaphysical." When he cannot explain the meaning of Billy's death in scientific terms, he makes an excuse and avoids the issue: "rising from the mess he formally withdrew."

27/28

The crew turns "sullen" and murmurous like a mob. Acting again with "prompt initiative," Captain Vere gives orders that disperse them, until they are called together again to witness Billy sliding into the sea. The sailors, disturbed by the sight, grow mutinous: "An uncertain movement began among them, in which some encroachment was made," until the "drumbeat dissolved the multitude." Vere again acts at "variance from usage" in "beating to quarters at an hour prior to the customary one"--"evidence of the necessity for unusual action implied in what he deemed to be temporarily the mood of his men. 'With mankind,' he would say, 'forms, measured forms are everything'." Vere's obvious good judgment on this occasion argues for his "variance from usage" in the case of Billy.

Then, like Melville a student of mythology, the Captain alludes to "Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood." Orpheus descended into hell, as has Vere. Having compared the meaning of Billy's Fall to Adam's and his crucifixion to Christ's, Melville now compares Vere to a pagan who represents civilization taming wild Nature. Myths are among the "forms, measured forms" that give meaning to life and help to maintain social order. The "spellbinding" lyre of Orpheus is equivalent to the ship's drum and the Boatswain's whistle.

Vere identifies Revolutionary France with "wild denizens of the wood"--"the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof"--and Britain (the Indomitable) with the forms of civilization, including Christianity. In *Moby-Dick* the liberal young Melville implicitly sanctions mutiny against mad Ahab, whereas in *Billy Budd*, portraying a wise Captain, an old conservative Melville affirms law and order, myth and ritual--"spellbinding"--for the survival of civilization: "The band on the quarter-deck played a sacred air, after which the chaplain went through the customary morning service. That done, the drum beat the retreat, and, toned by music and religious rites subserving the discipline and purpose of war, the men in their wonted orderly manner dispersed to the places allotted them when not at the guns."

Melville declares as his highest priority: “Truth uncompromisingly told.” He reinforces the meaning of the reference to Orpheus by devoting this chapter to the meaning of the war between France and Britain: A French ship named after a Christian saint has been renamed the *Atheiste* by the French government, “proclaiming the infidel audacity of the ruling power”—“the aptest name...ever given to a warship.” Atheism is negation with none of the “forms, measured forms” that sustain civilization. The battle between the Indomitable and the *Atheiste* is to this story what the battle between *Moby-Dick* and the giant squid is in *Moby-Dick*: Myth overcomes negation, order displaces disorder, civilization defeats barbarism.

The critics who condemn Vere accuse him of executing Billy out of ambition. “Unhappily he was cut off too early for the Nile and Trafalgar. The spirit that spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition,—never attained to the fullness of fame.” He “may yet” means he is *not* ambitious. Furthermore, hanging Billy has made him controversial and unpopular, never good for a military career. “Unhappily” conveys sympathy for Vere, not disapproval. Though Vere suffered over the tragedy, murmuring Billy’s name on his deathbed, “these were not the accents of remorse”—because he knows he made a necessary decision. Melville’s sympathy indicates he does not blame Vere either. Killed in battle shortly after the hanging, Vere is just as much a victim and just as dead as Billy. And whereas Billy is loved and remembered in legend as a virtual god, Vere dies in obscurity, unappreciated, deprived even of participation in the glorious British victory to come, by Nelson at Trafalgar.

From here to the end, the tone is extremely ironic: The official account of the events, supposedly factual, gets the facts absurdly wrong, portraying Claggart as a patriotic Good Guy and Billy as a treacherous murderer not even British. Melville balances his qualified support with this indictment of the established order. Neither science as represented by the surgeon, nor a journalist nor an historian can render truly the complex meaning of Billy Budd—only art can do that. Melville’s tragedy is truer than mere “facts,” like all great literature.

Sailors treasure pieces of the spar from which Billy was hung like Christians treasure relics of the crucifixion: “To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross.” To them the hanging was “somehow unavoidably inflicted” and Billy is a martyr. This mythic version is much truer than the official account, arguing that like great literature, enduring myth transcends the limitations of mere “facts.”

One sailor, a kind of disciple, writes a ballad that ends the story, the imagined “new testament” of Billy, which contrasts with the Christian gospels and is Melville’s last testament too. There is no resurrection nor immortality implied in this ballad, only a far more poignant dissolution. “Billy in the Darbies” means Billy in irons. The Christian chaplain is “good” but not relevant. Billy has his own Last Supper: “Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup... But aren’t it all sham?” Billy is too simple and innocent to have understood the artificiality of the “forms, measured forms”—the “spellbinding” and “sham” that sustain civilization. Only the tragic hero Vere understands, and he is dead, as Melville felt himself to be as a writer by 1891.

Melville’s psychological allegory is a variation on the themes of Adam losing his innocence in the Garden of Eden, and of the crucifixion. Billy is the child in us that must die for survival in a warring adult world. Claggart is the serpent, the educated head and ego responsible for the death of our innocence and our exile from the garden of childhood. We are aware of what we have crucified in ourselves and that is why Claggart looks like “the man of sorrows” in Chapter 17/18. Billy and Claggart are both extremes, neither of whom can survive, whereas Vere is the Captain of his soul, with integrity balancing head and heart, intellect and sympathy. The characters represent thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Vere’s transcendent capacity for intuition is evidence of his mature synthesis. Melville’s tragic vision and even his style in *Billy Budd* are consistent with the characterization of Vere.

