Billy Budd

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HERMAN MELVILLE

Herman Melville was born into a well-off family in New York City. He began writing at an early age, and served on a trans-Atlantic merchant ship at the age of twenty. Following this voyage, he taught for some time, but took to the sea again in 1841. His sea travels and experiences with Polynesian natives greatly influenced his writing, especially his popular book *Typee*, based on his experiences with some natives of the Pacific isles. After *Typee* he continued to write popular novels depicting life at sea, such as *Omoo* and *White-Jacket*, and, after marrying in 1847, settled down in New York and then in Massachusetts. Melville published *Moby Dick* in 1851, but (although it is regarded today as a classic) it was not a success. His literary career and popularity declined, but Melville continued to write, including *Billy Budd*. Deeply affected by the American Civil War, Melville also turned to writing poetry, though his poems, like his later novels, were also not highly regarded by his contemporaries. Melville died in 1891 in New York City, not a particularly popular author. After his death, though, his reputation was gradually recuperated, and he is now recognized as one of the greatest writers in the history of the United States.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of the story take place during Great Britain's conflict with Napoleonic France, when the British Royal Navy was desperate for sailors to serve on its ships. The story also takes place soon after the Nore Mutiny, when members of the *Sandwich* mutinied against their captain. The danger of mutiny thus looms in the background of the story, affecting many of the characters thoughts and actions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Billy's original ship, the *Rights-of-Man*, is named after a book written by Thomas Paine, which argues that political revolution is justified when a government fails to protect individual rights. Like Paine's book, Melville's novella is interested in the conflict between individual rights and society at large.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Billy Budd (an Inside Narrative)*
- **When Written:** Late 1880s to 1891
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1924
- **Literary Period:** American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Novella, historical fiction.
- **Setting:** Summer of 1797, aboard the Indomitable at sea in the Mediterranean
- **Climax:** After being falsely accused of plotting mutiny, Billy hits Claggart, unintentionally killing him.
- **Antagonist:** John Claggart
- **Point of View:** The story is recounted in the first-person voice of an anonymous narrator, but one who often has the knowledge of an omniscient narrator.

EXTRA CREDIT

A Forgotten Story. *Billy Budd* was never published during Melville's lifetime. A Columbia University professor researching Melville discovered the unknown manuscript of the novella among Melville's letters in 1919 and *Billy Budd* was at last published soon after.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator describes Billy Budd, a handsome, good-natured young sailor who is taken from his merchant ship, the **Rights-of-Man**, into service on a British Royal Navy warship, the **Indomitable** (in some editions, the *Bellipotent*). The captain of the **Rights-of-Man**, Captain Graveling, tells Lieutenant Ratcliffe of the **Indomitable**, who has selected Billy for naval service, that he is losing his best sailor. All the other sailors love Billy and would do anything for him. Before following Billy's adjustment to life on his new ship, the narrator describes Billy at greater length. Billy is innocent and naïve, and the narrator compares him to Adam in the Garden of Eden. He has "masculine beauty" and only one flaw: a tendency to stutter when nervous.

The narrator's main story takes place in the summer of 1797, soon after a number of mutinies have beset the British navy, including the infamous Nore Mutiny. On the **Indomitable**, though, there was no hint of mutiny, as everyone obeys and respects the intellectual, brave captain, Captain Vere. The narrator describes the ship's master-at-arms, a man of uncertain origin named John Claggart. Aboard the **Indomitable**, Billy is widely admired, but often finds himself in minor trouble. He asks an older sailor, the Dansker, for advice, and he tells Billy that Claggart "is down on" Billy. Billy is confused, though, as Claggart always treats him politely. Billy is unable to see the signs of Claggart's inner dislike of him. One day, for example, Billy spills a bowl of soup in the mess hall and Claggart sarcastically congratulates him, "Handsomely done,

my lad!" but Billy does not grasp the sarcasm. The narrator is unable to explain the reason for Claggart's hatred of Billy, but suggests that he was possibly envious both of Billy's handsome appearance and good moral nature.

One night, an after-guardsman wakes Billy up, wanting to speak with him in secret. He asks Billy for help and offers him two guineas. Unsure exactly what is being asked of him, Billy refuses the money. He is confused by the incident and again asks the Dansker for advice. The Dansker sees this event as confirmation that Claggart is against Billy, but Billy doesn't want to believe this, thinking that Claggart is fond of him. Meanwhile, Claggart's hatred of Billy grows. When the **Indomitable** is separated from the rest of its fleet after pursuing an enemy vessel, Claggart goes to Captain Vere and tells him that he suspects Billy Budd of plotting mutiny. Captain Vere is inclined not to believe Claggart, as he admires Billy's good behavior and handsome demeanor. He sends for Billy so that he can get to the bottom of the matter.

Captain Vere, Claggart, and Billy meet in the captain's cabin. Claggart repeats his accusation, and Billy is so stunned that he is unable to speak. He tries to speak and gesture violently, but his stutter stops him, and he ends up striking Claggart in the head. Claggart drops to the floor, dead. Captain Vere assembles a drumhead court and puts Billy on trial, hoping to resolve the matter quickly and privately, in case widespread news of Billy's deed might cause dissent and the beginnings of mutiny on the ship. Captain Vere and his court are troubled and conflicted, forced to decide between maritime law, which would call for Billy's execution, and their personal moral scruples and fondness for Billy. The court interrogates Billy and he tells them that he did kill Claggart, but not intentionally, and that Claggart was lying: he was not plotting mutiny. Captain Vere and the others believe Billy, who is taken away from the room so that the court can reach its verdict. Captain Vere insists that, although the court may have personal moral feelings in favor of Billy, they must make a decision based solely on the law and on Billy's actions. The court ultimately sentences Billy to execution.

The ship's chaplain visits Billy the night before his execution, but can scarcely say anything helpful, as Billy seems at peace with his fate and entirely innocent. The next morning, the crew of the **Indomitable** is called to deck to witness the execution and Billy is hanged. His body hangs perfectly still and is illuminated by the morning sunlight, as if in a "mystical vision." Days later, the ship's surgeon and purser debate whether the stillness of Billy's body during execution is proof of Billy's exceptional will power. Regardless, after Billy's death the captain orders everyone to return to work.

The narrator apologizes that he cannot offer a nice or symmetrical ending to his story, as is found in fictional tales, because he is giving a true account of actual events. He tells of Captain Vere's later death in combat. Just before dying, Captain Vere says his final words: "Billy Budd, Billy Budd." The narrator says that the only record of Billy's death was in a naval chronicle, which wrongly reported the story, claiming that Claggart had alerted the captain to the evil plotting of Billy, who had then cruelly stabbed Claggart to death. Finally, the narrator describes how the sailors of the **Indomitable** remembered Billy favorably, and memorialized him in a song that became a well-known ballad, "Billy in the Darbies." The narrator ends his story with the text of the ballad, which sympathetically narrates Billy's final moments.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Billy Budd – Billy is the protagonist of the novella and a perfect example of the type of person the narrator calls the Handsome Sailor. His beautiful appearance reflects his upstanding character and because of this he earns the admiration of almost all of those he serves with aboard both the **Rights-of-Man** and the **Indomitable**. Billy is an innocent, child-like young man, whom the narrator often compares to Adam before the fall of man. His innocent nature ends up being a liability aboard the **Indomitable**, though, as he is unable to understand or even notice the wickedness of Claggart, who irrationally hates Billy. His death is represented as a tragic martyrdom by the narrator, and although the only official record of his death condemns him as a criminal, he is remembered more sympathetically in the sailors' ballad with which Melville's story ends, "Billy in the Darbies."

Captain Vere – The valiant, intellectual captain of the **Indomitable**, a bachelor of about 40 years of age. He has a strong sense of duty and is conflicted when Billy kills Claggart. His personal conscience tells him not to punish Billy, who he knows is an innocent, good soul. However, he is bound to obey maritime law and fears a possible mutiny, so he ultimately argues to the ship's drumhead court that Billy should be executed.

John Claggart – The antagonist of the novella and the **Indomitable's** master-at-arms, Claggart is a deceptively wicked character. He has an attractive appearance (except for a protruding chin) and is able to fit in with society at most times, which hides his inner anger and sinister nature. For reasons unknown, he develops a hatred of Billy and harasses him onboard. He falsely accuses Billy of plotting mutiny against Captain Vere and is accidentally killed by Billy in the ensuing meeting between Vere, Billy and him.

The Dansker – An old, wise sailor on the **Indomitable**, who had fought valiantly under Admiral Nelson. His years of experience have given him wisdom, and Billy seeks advice from him several times. He tells Billy to beware of Claggart, who is "down on" Billy, but Billy doesn't believe the Dansker. The Dansker does

not otherwise intervene.

The Surgeon – The doctor of the **Indomitable**, who checks Claggart after he is struck by Billy and declares him dead. He also talks with the purser after Billy's death, refusing to see Billy's remarkable stillness while being hanged as an indication of his will power, which does not fall under the realm of scientific explanation.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Ratcliffe – A lieutenant on the **Indomitable**, Ratcliffe searches for men to conscript, forcibly if necessary, to join the ship. Upon seeing the handsome Billy, he immediately chooses him.

Captain Graveling – The captain of the **Rights-of-Man**, who is sad to have to let go of Billy, his best sailor, when Billy is impressed into naval service.

Red Whiskers – The only sailor on the **Rights-of-Man** who is initially not fond of Billy. He starts a fight with Billy but ultimately comes to respect and love him.

Squeak – A corporal serving under Claggart, whom Claggart orders to prank and harass Billy. Squeak makes up rumors about Billy insulting Claggart, which fuel Claggart's hatred of Billy.

Red Pepper – A sailor awakened by Billy's confrontation with the after-guardsman at night. He is skeptical of Billy's story and wants to punish Billy and the unidentified after-guardsman.

The After-Guardsman – An unnamed sailor who wakes Billy one night and offers him two guineas in exchange for helping him with an unspecified plot, probably a mutiny.

The Chaplain – The priest onboard the **Indomitable**, who goes to give spiritual advice to Billy before his execution. He is unable to say much to Billy, though, because Billy does not fear death and is so innocent the chaplain feels he does not any blessing or even really any religion.

The Purser – An officer of the **Indomitable** in charge of money onboard, who talks with the surgeon after Billy's death and claims that the complete stillness of Billy's body during his hanging shows Billy's remarkable will power.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

NATURAL CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE

Billy Budd begins with a lengthy description of the type of person known as the "handsome sailor" and the story's narrator often takes time away from the story to describe characters like Captain Vere or Claggart at length. As this suggests, the narrator of the story tends to see character as innate: people are either fundamentally good and innocent (like Billy Budd) or fundamentally sinister and bad, like Claggart. Thus, it is important for the narrator to describe characters fully before following them in the main story. Moreover, people's natural character in the story is closely connected to their physical appearance. "Handsome sailors" are admired both for their good looks and for their virtue. Billy Budd's handsome appearance signals to other sailors his good moral nature. The crew of the *Indomitable* (and Captain Vere) find it hard to believe that Billy would ever plan a mutiny largely because of his beauty, which they associate with innocence and upstanding morality. And when the narrator describes Claggart, the character's physical features are specifically related to aspects of his personality. The narrator says that Claggart's brow was the sort "associated with more than average intellect." But despite the narrator's concern for getting to the bottom of character's inner natures, some aspects of characters remain unknown. We never know Billy Budd's origins for certain, for example, while Claggart's motivations remain fundamentally a mystery.

The story also offers examples of when behavior does not match one's character, and when physical appearance contrasts with inner nature. Billy Budd's sudden outburst when he strikes Claggart seems very out of line with his gentle demeanor. And his inability to respond to Claggart's accusations when Captain Vere questions him might seem to suggest guilt, but in Billy's case it is simply a product of nervousness. (Fortunately for Billy, Captain Vere recognizes his stuttering as such, and does not interpret it as an outward sign of guilt.) And Claggart deliberately dissembles his appearance to Captain Vere when he accuses Billy of mutiny. He attempts to appear to the captain as a concerned, dutiful member of the ship, while also claiming that Billy's good behavior hides his true, disloyal nature. But it is Claggart, not Billy, whose outward appearance and behavior does not match his true character.

Thus, even while narrator insists on a close relationship between physical appearance and the innate moral qualities of a person, the story's events leave one wondering whether physical appearance is really a good indicator of someone's character. And in creating this question Billy Budd reveals a deeper level of exploration of the nature of appearances: the reliability of the narrator. While the narrator continues to espouse the belief in the connection between nature and appearance, the story continually calls such connections into question, suggesting that perhaps Melville as author does not

actually agree with his narrator, and therefore further suggesting that the things that the narrator asserts are true, or are simple, may in fact be not true, or not simple. This is not to say that the narrator is purposefully lying, but rather that the narrator may be fallible and that his interpretation of the story may be affected by his blindnesses, including his faith in the connection between nature and appearance.

DUTY, LOYALTY, AND CAMARADERIE

Within the naval world of the story, almost nothing is more important than the camaraderie among sailors on the same ship and their loyalty to their captain. The close bonds between fellow sailors can be seen in the example of the handsome sailor that the narrator describes early in the story (surrounded by his proud, admiring comrades), as well as the reluctance with which the captain of the *Rights-of-Man* lets Billy go. In addition to this camaraderie between sailors, each individual sailor also has a duty to the ship's captain, which ultimately stands in for a duty to the king. Every sailor has his own individual duties, depending on where in the boat he serves, but all these individual duties are part of a larger sense of loyalty to one's ship and captain.

In this naval culture, though, the specter of mutiny looms large. The story of *Billy Budd* takes place just after a period of time when the British navy had experienced a high number of mutinies, including the large-scale Nore Mutiny. Captain Vere is so careful not to have any kind of disloyal mutiny happen on his ship that he doesn't even permit Claggart to name the Nore Mutiny when he is accusing Billy of plotting against the captain. From the captain's perspective, mutiny is almost contagious: even a mere mention of the idea risks spreading disloyalty among the loyal comrades of his ship.

The line between loyalty and disloyalty is not always so clear, though. Claggart's accusations against Billy and Billy's trial blur this distinction. The reader knows that Claggart is being disloyal, lying to the captain and spreading false rumors, but Claggart makes his accusations seem as if they are arising from his loyalty to Captain Vere. (And this is how he is remembered in the naval chronicle story about Billy and him.) Billy is loyal to Captain Vere, but his act of striking Claggart is in contradiction of his duty as a sailor. In pronouncing judgment on Billy, Captain Vere is also forced to make a difficult decision involving loyalty and duty. Condemning Billy to death is, in a sense, turning his back on his comrade, the innocent sailor of whom he is quite fond. However, it is his duty as captain to follow the law. Moreover, in case a prolonged trial might lead to any possibility of insurrection on the ship, he has to make a quick decision that will ensure the safe functioning of his vessel. Thus, while the concepts of duty and loyalty become somewhat confused in the story, in the end Captain Vere makes a decision that respects his ultimate duty—to his ship and to the king—by following the law and executing Billy. But in doing so, is he in some sense being disloyal to his comrade?

JUSTICE

Closely related to duty in the story is the idea of justice. While the two are very similar, duty and loyalty tend to have more to do with interpersonal relationships. They are how the community of sailors aboard the *Indomitable* hold each other accountable. Justice, on the other hand, is a more abstract concept, having to do with larger issues of right and wrong. Because the central event of the story is the false accusation of Billy Budd and his subsequent trial, one of the main questions in the story is whether justice is served to Billy. There is even some ambiguity in the story regarding who is fit to judge Billy. Captain Vere insists on assembling a drumhead court onboard the ship to have a trial immediately, even though others agree that it might be better to wait and have an admiral decide Billy's fate.

In deciding the case, Captain Vere and his drumhead court have a number of aspects of the situation they can choose to consider or disregard. First, there is the personal conscience of those judging Billy, who are quite fond of him. There is also Billy's generally good nature and upstanding moral character. If striking Claggart was an unusual aberration in Billy's behavior, should Vere punish an ultimately good man? Most important, though, for Vere and his court, is the law itself and Billy's action. Regardless of Billy's intentions, his character, and other sailor's affection for him, he killed another sailor and under naval law has earned the punishment of death. But Vere's judgment is also motivated by practical considerations. He fears that if news of Billy's possible plot spreads or if Billy's trial is dragged on, dissent may spread among his sailors, potentially leading to a mutiny. He therefore wants to finish Billy's trial as quickly as possible, and this may be a motivating factor in the speed with which he decides that the court should not consider the circumstances and motives behind Billy's striking Claggart, but only "the blow's consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker's deed."

As this quotation makes clear, Vere adopts an eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth idea of justice: for killing Claggart, Billy now deserves to be killed. But is this a just punishment? Earlier in the story, the narrator informs us that those involved with the Nore Mutiny were able to absolve their wrongs by serving valiantly afterwards. Why should Billy not get a chance to redeem himself with better future behavior? Part of the reason for his sentence may be to deter any other sailors from considering mutiny. After all, Billy Budd's good behavior was largely the result of his witnessing a sailor being harshly punished for bad behavior. Vere's sentencing of Billy might not be just, but it is practical, and ensures the continued well-being of his ship. Nonetheless, in attempting to be an effective, practical captain, Vere neglects broader questions of right and wrong; Melville leaves these questions open-ended, for the

reader to decide.

INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY

The story's questions of duty and justice often center around a conflict between an individual and society. In deciding Billy's fate, for example, Captain Vere must decide between his own personal admiration of Billy's character and what may be best for the ship's community and the navy as a whole, as enshrined in naval law. And the entire story is set in the context of the royal navy, where sailors have all devoted their individual lives to serving the interests of their country. Throughout *Billy Budd*, Melville explores how individuals are often subsumed by the larger interests of society. Many of the sailors aboard the *Indomitable* are conscripted—that is, taken into service by force. This curtailment of individual rights is encapsulated symbolically when Billy is forced to leave his merchant ship, the *Rights-of-Man*, in order to join the *Indomitable* (in some editions, called the *Bellipotent*). The indomitable power of society—or, in the case of the *Bellipotent* (which literally means powerful in war), of war—is able to trump the rights of individual people. Captain Vere's main concern is in putting down any hint of mutiny, which means silencing individual, dissenting voices, in favor of obedience to the captain and the navy.

Billy Budd himself must also choose between his own personal honor and the well-being of the *Indomitable*, when he is conflicted over whether to alert the captain to a possible mutiny. Doing so would be good for the community of the ship, but would compromise Billy's individual honor, making him a tattletale. Billy ends up choosing his own individuality in this case, as he remains silent, but by contrast Captain Vere sides with society, adhering strictly to the law and not letting his own conscience guide him in ordering for Billy's execution. Billy's death makes the loss of individuality considered by Melville more than a merely abstract notion: as an individual, Billy literally loses his life because the interests of society (his ship, the navy, and ultimately Great Britain) are deemed more important. Because of the tragic sympathy with which Billy's death is portrayed, Melville's story can be seen as lamenting this prioritizing of society and as criticizing the social structures that curb individuality. However, the *Indomitable* is a successful ship; it is also possible to read the story as showing the tragic, but necessary, sacrifice of individuals for larger purposes.

THE PRESENT VS. THE PAST

The narrator of *Billy Budd* often contrasts the present time of his story with the glorious past—for example, as he admiringly describes the valiant service of Admiral Nelson and laments the introduction of guns and ironsides to naval combat. For the narrator, earlier forms of naval combat were more poetic and honorable. In his own time, the master-at-arms does not even instruct sailors in the use of weapons anymore (since swords are no longer used), but simply acts as "a sort of chief of police" on the lower decks.

There is a general sense of decline throughout the story, an idea that the past was better than the present. Thus, when Billy Budd is praised, such praise is often in the form of comparisons to ancient things, whether Greek statues or even Adam, the first man. Closely related to the contrast between the present and the past is that between the young and the old, which the story also explores. The Dansker, for example, is admired by both Billy and the narrator for his wisdom, gained through many years of experience, in contrast to Billy's innocence and naïveté. Having served under Admiral Nelson, the Dansker is a vestige of an earlier, more valiant era in seafaring. In the narrator's conception of the world, characters are often praiseworthy precisely because of some association with the past, whether because they participated in it (like the Dansker), or, in Billy's case, because his innocence has kept him unaware of the declined state of the contemporary world.

STORYTELLING, RUMOR, AND TRUTH

The clash between false rumor and truth is central to the plot of *Billy Budd*. The story turns on the false rumors that Claggart makes up and reports to Captain Vere, while Vere must decide between the truthfulness of Claggart's and Billy's stories. The distinction between truth and rumor is thus a matter of life or death for both Claggart and Billy. Moreover, the very story of Billy's tragic death is caught between these two categories. The naval chronicle that reports his death has authority and supposedly preserves the truth of the situation for posterity. However, the reader knows that the naval chronicle, which relates Claggart's version of the story, actually ends up reporting nothing more than a false rumor. By contrast, the sailors' ballad about Billy Budd, which sympathetically describes his final moments, can be seen as closer to the truth, even though such seafaring songs are usually less truthful and trustworthy than media like the naval chronicle.

Even Melville's story itself plays with this tension between true and false stories. The narrator constantly draws attention to himself as telling the story, referring to himself with personal pronouns and addressing the reader directly. He calls attention to his frequent digressions from the main narrative of his story, as well as to his ability to fabricate and make things up. He says it would be easy, for example, to make up an incident explaining the malice Claggart had toward Billy Budd, though there was no such incident. In these moments, the narrator insists on his trustworthiness, but this actually has the effect of making the reader skeptical and more aware of the narrator's ability to stray from the truth throughout the tale. Moreover, he acknowledges the limits of his knowledge as a narrator, when he admits that he can only imagine how Captain Vere informed

Billy of his death sentence. The entire story of *Billy Budd* thus comes to resemble the other stories told within it. Like other sailors' yarns, it hangs somewhere in the border between rumor and truth.

Further, the narrator asserts a number of times that his tale of Billy Budd is a true story, an actual event. This assertion has the affect of separating the narrator from Melville, the author. Melville wrote *Billy Budd*, a fiction. But the narrator is telling a true story about a man named Billy Budd. The narrator, then, is a part of the world created by Melville, and the narrator exists at the same level as Billy, Claggart, Vere, and all the other characters. The narrator, then, is just as fallible as those other characters. And just as people may disagree about what happened even though they witnessed the same events, the narrator's story of Billy Budd should be seen not necessarily as *the* version of what happened, but as *a* version.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SHIP NAMES

The names of both of the ships Billy serves on are significant. He is originally a sailor on the **Rights-of-Man**, which the narrator notes takes its name from a book by Thomas Paine. Paine's book, which played an influential role in pushing the American colonies toward the American Revolution, essentially argues that political revolution is justified when a government fails to protect individual rights. Paine's book thus affirms the rights of individuals over the interests of society at large. The **Rights-of-Man**, then, can be seen as symbolizing the importance of individual rights. When Billy is forced to leave this ship and says "good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man," he bids farewell to his own personal rights, which have been trumped by the navy. The naval ship Billy joins has an equally significant name: the **Indomitable** (in some editions, the *Bellipotent*). This ship name symbolizes the indomitable, unbeatable force of society (for the *Bellipotent*, the power of war), which curtails the individual rights of the sailors, many of whom have been forcibly conscripted into naval service. The ship names in Melville's novella thus encapsulate the narrative's central conflict between individuals and society.

CHRISTIAN IMAGERY

Throughout the novella, Billy Budd is admiringly compared to various Christian figures. He is often described as similar to Adam, emphasizing his complete innocence and lack of experience with the civilized, corrupt world. However, toward the end of the narrative, he is especially associated with Jesus Christ. He accepts his execution peacefully, and seems so at ease with his fate that the chaplain has no spiritual advice to give him. The mystical morning light that illuminates his body as it is hanged also paints Billy as a holy martyr. And in the days after Billy's death, the narrator notes that the sailors of the Indomitable treat the spar from which he was hanged as a special relic like the cross of Christ's crucifixion. All of this Christian imagery characterizes Billy as a martyr and emphasizes his innocence and good moral nature. Moreover, the idea of martyrdom and the association of Billy with Jesus underlines Billy's death as a sacrifice of individuality for a larger community, just as Jesus gave his own life for the benefit of all mankind.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Billy Budd and Other Stories* published in 1986.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The 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.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has begun to describe the world within which the story is set. It is the time before steamships, when a type of seaman the narrator calls the "Handsome Sailor" was adored by the men he worked with. The Handsome Sailor is admirable for his masculine "power" as well as his trustworthy, "honest" character. In this passage, the narrator introduces the idea that a person's outer appearance usually reflects their internal personality. As the rest of the novel will show, this is a notion that is both supported and contested by the story of Billy Budd. This passage stresses that while "comeliness and power" is respected within the world of the sailors, so is morality. As will become clear, these values can sometimes prove contradictory.

But they all love him. Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here.

Related Characters: Captain Graveling (speaker), Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described a ship in the British Navy, the Indomitable, which was short of men and thus recruited civilians. The ship also recruited Billy Budd, a handsome, loveable young sailor who had previously served aboard another ship, called the Rights-of-Man. In this passage, the narrator explains that the sailors of the Rights-of-Man loved Billy Budd and would do endless favors for him. This makes clear that Billy Budd was not only an unequivocally good person, but someone who united people through their love for him, creating a "happy family." This description emphasizes the way in which the world of a ship functions as a self-contained society, with men taking on traditionally feminine tasks such as darning (mending patches in) a man's trousers for him.

Indeed, from a contemporary perspective it is possible to identify a note of homoeroticism in the narrator's description of the other sailors' love for Billy Budd. The sailors' absolute devotion to Billy seems almost romantic in nature, and the tasks they perform for him are similar to the loving acts performed by romantic partners and family members for their loved ones. This emphasizes the extremely close-knit nature of the men living on a ship, and the importance of living harmoniously as a community and even a "family."

And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*.

Related Characters: Billy Budd (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

Billy Budd has been conscripted to leave his old ship, the Rights-of-Man, to join a new ship named the Indomitable. The captain of the Rights-of-Man has complained that he is losing his best man, and that Billy has ended the quarrelling that used to take place among his sailors. As Billy leaves the ship, he says "and good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man." On the surface, this reveals Billy's fondness for his previous ship, as well as his calm acceptance of moving onto a new one.

At the same time, his farewell also has a symbolic meaning; as illustrated by the ship's name, Billy is bidding farewell to a community in which the rights of individuals were respected. The name "Rights-of-Man" comes from Thomas Paine's 1791 book, which morally condoned revolution against a government if that government does not respect the rights of individual citizens. This argument has a strong connection to the issue of mutiny aboard ships. On the new ship, the Indomitable, the rights of individual sailors are suppressed in order to ensure the absolute power of the ship over the French Republic. This tension between the authority of society and its leaders and the rights of the individual is one of the main themes of the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator begins Chapter 2 by describing Billy Budd's physical appearance in more detail, noting his striking beauty and "ambiguous smile." The narrator has compared Billy both to courtly women and Classical Greek sculptures, before explaining that as a baby Billy was found abandoned, and thus people suspect that his real family may indeed be noble. In this passage, the narrator compares Billy to the Biblical Adam before the Fall of Man, suggesting his childlike innocence and moral purity. This association means that, by this point, Billy has been linked, whether explicitly or in-explicitly, to three major Biblical characters: Adam, the first man, Moses, who was also found as a baby and raised within the Egyptian royal family, and Jesus, who was the son

of God and yet was raised by a humble Jewish couple.

Through these associations, Billy takes on a kind of holy significance within the play. His unusual beauty and moral goodness suggest that he is an exceptional person akin to a mythic or religious hero. His connection to Adam and Jesus in particular is important, as both characters end up severely punished for acts that are arguably no fault of their own. By describing Billy's similarity to these characters, the narrator hints at the tragic fate that will eventually befall the innocent Billy.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ To the British Empire the Nore Mutiny was what a strike in the fire brigade would be to London threatened by general arson.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has mentioned the Nore Mutiny, one of several recent rebellions aboard ships of the British Empire. The narrator claims that the Nore Mutiny was more dangerous to the Empire than the French (their enemies in the present war), and in this passage compares the mutiny to what would happen if "a strike in the fire brigade" coincided with London falling victim to arson. This comparison highlights the way that mutinies make even the most powerful militaries extremely vulnerable, a fact that shows that the slightest threat of rebellion is dangerous to all in authority.

Yet the comparison also highlights another important connection; both strikes and mutinies take place because those resisting (in the case of these examples, firemen and sailors) wish to use their collective strength in order to achieve some level of power over their superiors. In both cases, this often happens when groups of workers are treated badly by those in authority, and thus subvert their "duty" with the aim of pursuing justice.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the victory of Admiral Nelson in reverent terms, before returning to focus again on the Nore Mutiny. Although the mutineering sailors were defeated, the same discontent that existed before the mutiny continued after it ended. As a result, people remain on the lookout for "some return of trouble." The narrator's words here connect the Nore Mutiny to possible future events in the novel, and indeed, the world of the novel and actions of its characters are haunted by this possibility of mutiny from the beginning. The threat of mutiny causes everyone to regard each other with suspicion, and encourages ship captains to harshly punish anyone breaking the rules in order to dissuade others from instigating another rebellion.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ His brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect; silken jet curls partly clustering over it, making a foil to the pallor below, a pallor tinged with a faint shade of amber akin to the hue of time-tinted marbles of old. This complexion, singularly contrasting with the red or deeply bronzed visages of the sailors, and in part the result of his official seclusion from the sunlight, though it was not exactly displeasing, nevertheless seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood.

Related Characters: John Claggart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has introduced John Claggart, a the "master-at-arms" on the Indomitable. Advances in weapons technology have made John's role on the ship somewhat redundant, and he is thus now charged with simply maintaining order on deck. In this passage, the narrator describes Claggart's physical appearance, noting the correspondence between Claggart's looks and his inner personality. The narrator makes use of phrenology, a branch of pseudoscience popular in the 19th century that held that the size and shape of a person's head reflected details about their intelligence, abilities, and temperament. (Phrenology has since been refuted as scientifically meaningless as well

as racist.) Here, the narrator claims that Claggart's brow indicates that he is more intelligent than the average person.

Claggart is also unusual in another way; whereas most sailors have a "red or deeply bronzed" face as a result of spending their time outside in the sun, Claggart is pale. The narrator notes that this gives the impression that Claggart is unwell or "abnormal in the constitution and blood." This description creates a somewhat contradictory impression of Claggart; he seems at once unusually intelligent and also sickly, a fact that hints at his defective moral character. As in the rest of the novel, the narrator seems committed to the idea that a person's outward appearance reflects their internal personality, even when their looks provide contrasting clues about what's inside.

❝ Such sanctioned irregularities...lend color to something for the truth whereof I do not vouch, and hence have some scruple in stating; something I remember having seen in print, though the book I cannot recall... In the case of a warship short of hands whose speedy sailing was imperative, the deficient quota, in lack of any other way of making it good, would be eked out by drafts culled directly from the jails.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has introduced John Claggart and described his intelligent-seeming yet strangely pale appearance. The narrator notes that the way in which John joined the crew of the Indomitable is unknown, and in this passage mentions a rumor that some warships without enough sailors would recruit men "directly from the jails." The narrator's words emphasize the theme of storytelling, rumor, and the slippery nature of the truth. He says he remembers seeing this rumor "in print, though the book I cannot recall...". Such a statement highlights the unreliability of human memory and the ease with which false statements can be given the illusion of authority. After all, even if the narrator *did* see this story in a book, the author of the book could also have been lying about or misremembering the truth. Furthermore, this calls into the question the narrator's reliability, particularly as he claims (in other cases) to be presenting pure fact.

The rumor itself also increases the sinister impression of Claggart, while pointing to an important paradox in the way that society treats prisoners versus men serving in the military. Prisoners are people deemed harmful to society, whose crimes theoretically warrant them being locked up. Meanwhile, military men are supposed to represent upstanding, honorable citizens who possess the skills and temperament necessary to defend the country. However, if the rumor the narrator mentions is true, there are some contexts in which prisoners are thought capable of serving in the military, a fact that suggests that in both cases, men are simply used as "pawns" by leaders in order to increase the power of the Empire.

❝ But the less credence was to be given to the gun-deck talk touching Claggart, seeing that no man holding his office in a man-of-war can ever hope to be popular with the crew.

Related Characters: John Claggart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has mentioned a rumor that some men are recruited to join ships directly from jail, and added that some people say this is true of John Claggart. However, the narrator dismisses this as unfounded conjecture that probably originated because the nature of Claggart's position inherently makes him unpopular with the crew. This statement raises sympathy for Claggart, as it suggests that nothing he could do would make the sailors he supervises like him. At the same time, it indicates the fundamental problem of the hierarchical structure of authority aboard the ship. In one sense, it is possible to view the ship as a microcosm of society as a whole, with struggles between different ranks reflecting tensions between the ruling and working classes of the general population.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it too!

Related Characters: John Claggart (speaker), Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

On a particularly rough day at sea, Billy spills a bowl of soup in the mess hall. Claggart walks past and at first pays no attention, but once he sees that it is Billy who spilled the soup, he stops and remarks, "Handsomely done, my lad!". Claggart's remarks are clearly laced with sarcastic antagonism, but because Billy is so pure-hearted he fails to pick up on this. Indeed, it is ironic that Claggart teases Billy precisely by pointing to his "handsome" nature, while this very nature prevents Billy from understanding the true meaning of Claggart's words. Note the subtle overtone of erotic tension created by the fact that Claggart uses the word "handsome" three times, perhaps indicating he is jealous of Billy's beauty and popularity.

❝ Now something such an one was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living but born with him and innate, in short "a depravity according to nature."

Related Characters: John Claggart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

Following the incident in which Claggart sarcastically insults Billy for spilling his soup, the narrator ponders the reason why Claggart dislikes Billy. The narrator has observed that Claggart perhaps envies Billy's good looks and kindly disposition, and in this passage contrasts Billy's goodness with Claggart's "evil nature."The narrator emphasizes that Claggart did not become evil as a result of "vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living," but was simply born that way. This coheres with the theme that people conform to certain types––such as noble heroes and evil villains––and that these types are so naturally embedded within a person that they can be detected through that person's physical appearance. Note how this contrasts to the social determinist view of humanity, which posits that people's personalities are the result of their experiences. And while the narrator here seems to support this view that one's "nature" is inborn, elsewhere Melville undercuts its validity.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ But the incident confirmed to him certain telltale reports purveyed to his ear by "Squeak," one of his more cunning corporals... the corporal, having naturally enough concluded that his master could have no love for the sailor, made it his business, faithful understrapper that he was, to foment the ill blood by perverting to his chief certain innocent frolics of the good-natured foretopman, besides inventing for his mouth sundry contumelious epithets he claimed to have overheard him let fall.

Related Characters: Squeak, John Claggart, Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator observes that powerful feelings can be evoked by completely ordinary incidents, as is the case with Claggart's anger at the spilled soup. The narrator adds that Claggart may believe that Billy spilled the soup as a deliberate affront to Claggart; this suspicion could have resulted from rumors created by a corporal named Squeak, who tells Claggart lies insinuating that Billy doesn't like him. Once again, the narrator illustrates the complex web of hierarchical power that connects all the men onboard the ship, and shows that this hierarchy creates feelings of jealousy, suspicion and resentment between the men.

This passage is also a compelling lesson in the danger of rumor. While Squeak views himself as "faithful," and his actions merely as the perversion of "innocent frolics," the lies he tells about Billy inadvertently lead to both Billy and Claggart's deaths. The name "Squeak" alludes to this sense of whimsical harmlessness, as well as the notion that Squeak is both mischievous and subservient, like a little mouse. "Squeak" could also represent the lies that Squeak tells, which he perceives to be inconsequential but which lead to devastating consequences.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Every sailor, too, is accustomed to obey orders without debating them; his life afloat is externally ruled for him.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described Billy's difficulty in understanding that Claggart disliked him. Although not stupid, Billy is nonetheless innocently naïve, and it is in fact this quality that makes him a good sailor. As the narrator explains in this passage, sailors must be "accustomed to obey[ing] orders without debating them," and thus Billy's trustful innocence is a useful quality, even while it makes him oblivious to the threat presented by Claggart.

Once again, the narrator has highlighted a troubling paradox when it comes to the life of sailors. Although Billy's ability to accept his life being "externally ruled for him" makes him an effective member of the overall community, it prevents him from seeking justice for himself and, arguably, those around him. He is unable to recognize Claggart's unfair treatment simply because Claggart is his superior. As a result, he suffers a loss of individual dignity.

> The same, your honor; but, for all his youth and good looks, a deep one. Not for nothing does he insinuate himself into the good will of his shipmates, since at the least all hands will at a pinch say a good word for him at all hazards. ...It is even masked by that sort of good-humored air that at heart he resents his impressment. You have but noted his fair cheek. A man trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies.

Related Characters: John Claggart (speaker), Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 344

Explanation and Analysis

Claggart has gone to Captain Vere to tell him he is suspicious that a mutiny is being planned, led by Billy Budd. This rumor is false, and at first Captain Vere reacts incredulously; he doesn't believe Billy could be capable of such a deed, considering his kind, appealing manner. In this passage, Claggart agrees about Billy's "youth and good looks," but suggests that his outward appearance might be concealing internal resentment at having been conscripted onto the Indomitable. Note the cunning way in which Claggart manages to persuade Captain Vere that Billy is duplicitous. Rather than denying the assertion that Billy is handsome, Claggart agrees, but proposes that this in itself is suspicious.

Indeed, this idea that beauty is inherently suspicious or deceitful has a long history in Western culture, although it has been much more commonly used to discredit women. This idea is particularly relevant in the context of the sea, as one of its most famous manifestations is in the figure of the siren, a supernaturally attractive woman (in some interpretations) who would lure sailors to their deaths through the beauty of her singing. Although Claggart is not accusing Billy of *being* a siren, he is suggesting that Billy has committed a very similar crime––luring sailors into self-sabotage through his handsome appearance. This point is emphasized by Claggart's claim that "a man trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies."

Chapter 20 Quotes

> Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!

Related Characters: Captain Vere (speaker), Billy Budd, John Claggart

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 352

Explanation and Analysis

Captain Vere has summoned Billy to his cabin and informed him of Claggart's accusations. Billy is so shocked that he cannot speak, and when Captain Vere compels him too, Billy strikes out his hand, accidentally killing Claggart. After the doctor pronounces Claggart dead, Captain Vere declares that Claggart has been "struck dead by an angel of God!". This dramatic language highlights the peculiarity of the events within the captain's cabin. First, despite his total innocence, Billy is unable to defend himself verbally. When he finally reacts to the accusation, it is by accidentally murdering his accuser. It is almost as if Billy's body has acted in revenge against Claggart, even while his mind and soul are unable to do so––an idea that reveals Billy's angelic purity.

Captain Vere's words further emphasize the notion that Billy is an "angel," incapable of intentionally committing sin. Indeed, this connection furthers another comparison: the similarity between Billy and Jesus. Like Jesus, Billy is morally innocent––and yet is punished by death. Based on Captain Vere's exclamation, it seems clear that he knows it is unjust to hang Billy. However, as captain of the ship, Vere is also forced to maintain law and order, a fact that prohibits him from acting according to his own individual conscience and delivering justice.

Feeling that unless quick action was taken on it, the deed of the foretopman, so soon as it should be known on the gun decks, would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew, a sense of the urgency of the case overruled in Captain Vere every other consideration.

Related Characters: Captain Vere

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 355

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has commented that it is difficult to assess whether or not Captain Vere acted fairly in summoning a drumhead court (a court assembled "in the field" of battle for urgent matters). While the doctor was concerned that Captain Vere was suffering from momentary madness, in this passage the narrator suggests that Vere's actions were necessary in order to prevent a mutiny like the one that took place aboard the Nore. In this passage, the narrator describes historical events as being akin to "slumbering embers" that can be awakened within the present, thus recreating the "fire" of the original event. Within this analogy, Vere takes on the role of a fireman, extinguishing the embers before they destroy his ship. This also recalls the earlier comparison of the Nore Mutiny to a fire brigade strike in the middle of an arson attack.

For the time, did I not perceive in you—at the crisis too—a troubled hesitancy, proceeding, I doubt not, from the clash of military duty with moral scruple—scruple vitalized by compassion.

Related Characters: Captain Vere (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

Billy's trial is taking place, and the drumhead court has heard the accusations against him as well as Billy's own testimony. Billy has confirmed that he killed Claggart by accident, but added that Claggart was lying when he claimed that Billy was planning a mutiny. When asked if he knows of any mutinies being planned, Billy hesitates, before lying and saying that that he doesn't. In this passage, Captain Vere explains that he noticed Billy hesitate, and suspects that he was deciding to act on "military duty" or "moral scruple." This is a correct assessment of Billy's behavior, proving Captain Vere's keen insight into human nature. The fact that Vere is so perceptive and yet is still overseeing Billy's wrongful condemnation makes Billy's fate even more tragic.

Captain Vere's words also highlight that the dilemma Billy faced as an individual is representative of a larger problem within the military. If there is a "clash" between one's individual moral principles and one's duty as a sailor, does this not indicate that there is something immoral about aspects of serving in the military? As Billy's case makes clear, whatever action he took would constitute a betrayal, whether of himself, his peers, or Captain Vere.

But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?

Related Characters: Captain Vere (speaker), Billy Budd

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

During his trial, Billy admits to accidentally killing John Claggart, but maintains that Claggart was lying about Billy's supposed plan to start a mutiny. Billy himself lies, however, when asked if he knows of any mutinies being planned and swears he doesn't. In this passage, Captain Vere ponders the difficulty of the decision facing the drumhead court. Because Billy has confessed to the "overt act" of killing Claggart, in some ways the matter is rather simple; he is inarguably guilty of committing murder, even if it was accidental. At the same time, as Vere points out, there is much more to the story than this simple picture.

Like the contradiction between Billy's outward appearance and the rumors Claggart attempted to pin to him, there is a large tension between the crime to which Billy has confessed and his evident kind and innocent character. This raises the question of whether we should judge a person based on their outer appearance or behaviors, or seek to evaluate the internal truth of their personality. As Vere points out, this becomes particularly complicated in the context of Christian beliefs about morality. Billy is seemingly "innocent before God," as God can see past superficial

appearances into a person's internal motivations. However, in the context of the military, Billy is guilty and therefore must be condemned to death.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ Not that like children Billy was incapable of conceiving what death really is. No; but he was wholly without irrational fear of it, a fear more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterated Nature.

Related Characters: Billy Budd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 372

Explanation and Analysis

Billy, condemned to death, is being kept on the upper gun deck. He is wearing white and has a peaceful expression; the ship's chaplain approaches, but is left speechless by how serene Billy looks. In this passage, the narrator describes Billy's lack of fear about death, comparing Billy's disposition with the attitude of "so-called barbarous" peoples who have a better understanding of nature than "highly civilized communities." Although on one hand the narrator is associating Billy with non-Christian, indigenous populations, it is clear from the rest of the imagery in this scene that Billy is representative of a holy, Christ-like serenity. His calm disposition in the face of death directly resembles Jesus's (presumed) attitude to his own crucifixion, as does Billy's white outfit glowing mystically in the darkness.

❝ Marvel not that having been made acquainted with the young sailor's essential innocence...the worthy man lifted not a finger to avert the doom of such a martyr to martial discipline. So to do would not only have been as idle as invoking the desert, but would also have been an audacious transgression of the bounds of his function.

Related Characters: The Chaplain

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 373

Explanation and Analysis

The ship's chaplain has come to visit Billy before his death, and has spoken to him briefly about death and the afterlife. Although Billy did not seem particularly interested, the chaplain reasons that this is due to Billy's profound innocence rather than any lack of religiosity. In this passage the narrator observes that, in spite of his affection for Billy and knowledge of Billy's innocence, the chaplain does not take action to try to avoid Billy's fate. The narrator reasons that such a choice would be impossible and would not alter the situation.

The narrator's observations constitute a powerful and damning statement on the nature of morality, authority, and society. The chaplain is supposed to be the religious and moral centre of the ship, and yet is powerless to prevent the death of an innocent man. This highlights the force of the ship as a whole, and the helplessness of any one individual in the face of this might. Just like Captain Vere, the chaplain knows that Billy does not deserve to die; yet like Captain Vere, the chaplain places the larger community above his own moral reasoning, thereby sacrificing Billy's life.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ Billy stood facing aft. At the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance, were these—"God bless Captain Vere!"

Related Characters: Billy Budd, Captain Vere

Related Themes:

Page Number: 375

Explanation and Analysis

At four in the morning, Billy is executed. The chaplain accompanies Billy in his final minutes; as Billy stands ready, he cries out "God bless Captain Vere!" and is then hanged. Billy's choice of final words show that he is a loyal sailor right until the very last moment of his life. At first, it seems almost ridiculous that he should be so loyal, considering he is being unjustly killed for a crime he committed by accident.

On the other hand, by pledging loyalty to Captain Vere before his execution, Billy ensures that his death is not for nothing. Through his devotion, he inspires his fellow soldiers to remain obedient to their captain; the effectiveness of this is demonstrated by the fact that those present echo "God bless Captain Vere" after Billy's death.

Meanwhile, Billy's words are also a message to Vere himself, showing the captain that Billy does not resent him for the way everything turned out.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ 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. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

The story of Billy Budd has come to an end with Billy's execution and burial at sea. The narrator announces that it is impossible to achieve "the symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction" when relating stories from real life. He confesses that there is no neat conclusion to the narrative, and that "truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges." This passage is an example of metafiction, in which the novel draws attention to itself as a novel (although it does so through the narrator's insistence that the story of Billy Budd is true). By claiming that Billy's story has no clear conclusion, the narrator emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of the tale.

Meanwhile, the narrator's words also clarify the realist nature of the novel. This is also somewhat paradoxical, as the story contains many mystical elements, as well as strong religious overtones and a reliance on character "types" (such as the handsome sailor) that are more suited to a genre such as a fable than a realist novel. Despite toying with these tropes, however, the narrator's emphatic statement that Billy's story is true suggests that the moral problems raised by the narrative are akin to those found in real life, and should be treated seriously as a result.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator recounts how in the time before steamships, sailors could often be seen surrounding a "Handsome Sailor" in admiring groups. He remembers one time he saw an African sailor with gold earrings and a silk handkerchief, surrounded by a diverse group of shipmates from various countries, who all looked at the handsome sailor proudly. The narrator clarifies that this kind of handsome sailor was not a dandy, but was strong and a good sailor, whose upright "moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make."

The narrator immediately situates his story in a more interesting past, before the arrival of steamships. The morally upright and handsome sailor is a prime example of the way that physical appearance and inner character are connected in the novella. The African sailor shows how a virtuous, handsome sailor can bring together a diverse array of sailors into a tight-knit group of comrades.

The narrator says that this kind of handsome sailor was precisely what Billy Budd, also known as "Baby" Budd, was. Billy was a 21-year-old sailor, who joined the British navy after having served on a merchant ship called the **Rights-of-Man**. A ship in the royal navy, the **Indomitable** (called the **Bellipotent** in some editions), was short of men and thus conscripted civilians. After stopping the **Rights-of-Man** and seeing Billy Budd, the lieutenant of the **Indomitable**, Lieutenant Ratcliffe, immediately chose him over any other man to join the boat. Billy Budd did not object, though the narrator comments that any objection would have been "as idle as the protest of a goldfinch popped into a cage."

The lieutenant assumes that Billy will be a good sailor based on his physical appearance. The Indomitable can be seen as representing the powerful force of society (and war), which overcomes the rights of individuals (symbolized by the Rights-of-Man) by forcing Billy to join the navy. Because objecting to the force of the navy would have been as ineffectual as a bird protesting being put into a cage, the narrator implicitly compares society to a cage that inhibits individuals.

The sailors of the **Rights-of-Man** view Billy with "silent reproach" as he prepares to leave their ship. The narrator describes the ship's captain, Captain Graveling. He is a respectable man, about 50 years old, who values peace and quiet and is always concerned for his boat's safety. As Billy Budd gathers his things from his cabin, Lieutenant Ratcliffe comes aboard the **Rights-of-Man** and helps himself to some liquor.

The sailors of the Rights-of-Man feel slightly betrayed when their comrade Billy leaves for another ship. But whatever Billy's individual wishes regarding to his duty to his shipmates on the Rights-of-Man, he is forced to depart by the larger forces of society, in this case the navy, which can forcibly impress him into service. Note also how Ratcliffe, the emissary of the navy, casually just takes some liquor from the captain of the Rights-of-Man: another example of "society" enforcing itself on the individual.

Captain Graveling tells Ratcliffe that he is taking away his best man. His crew was full of quarrels until Billy came. Billy's virtue improved those around him, who became fond of him, except for one sailor identified as Red Whiskers. Red Whiskers was jealous and tried to start a fight with Billy. Billy bested him in the fight, and Red Whiskers ended up respecting and loving Billy. The captain says, "anybody will do anything for Billy Budd."

Billy is further characterized as a fundamentally and naturally virtuous man. However, the fact that Billy could improve those around him suggests that people's natures can change. If someone's character can be improved by being in contact with a good person, can it also be corrupted by exposure to evil? The anecdote of Red Whiskers also establishes Billy's physical strength.

Ratcliffe says he understands, but that the king would be pleased to know that Captain Graveling was offering up his best man to a naval ship. Billy Budd emerges from his cabin with a box of things and the lieutenant tells him he can't carry all that on-board, jokingly calling Billy Budd by the name Apollo. The narrator notes that the **Rights-of-Man** was named after the book by Thomas Paine, which affirms the natural rights of individuals and asserts individual's rights to revolt if their rights are not respected by their government.

Ratcliffe's comment shows that he sees military conscription as the necessary sacrifice of an individual for the greater good of the king and the country. The fact that Graveling's ship takes its name from Paine's book heightens it as a symbol of individual rights, which are here curtailed by societal concerns. The comparison of Billy to Apollo emphasizes his handsomeness, but also links him to a distant, heroic, and mythical past.

As he's leaving the boat, Billy says farewell to his old ship and shipmates. This irritates Ratcliffe, who thinks it's a slight against being conscripted into the navy. The narrator, though, notes that this would have been far from Billy's good nature. Aboard the **Indomitable**, Billy becomes at home, liked by other sailors for his "good looks" and genial attitude. He is much merrier than most sailors conscripted into the navy and the narrator guesses that this may be due to the fact that he has a family back home he knows is proud of him.

Billy's farewell is a gesture of his camaraderie with his now former shipmates, but Ratcliffe interprets it as a contradiction of his new duty to the Indomitable, and symbolically you could describe Ratcliffe's concern being that Billy's farewell is actually a stated farewell to his individual rights, and as such a slight against those infringing on his rights (though Billy, an innocent, has no sense of this). Billy's good looks and good behavior equally gain him respect aboard his new ship.

CHAPTER 2

The narrator describes how Billy looked even younger than his age, with an almost feminine face. His transition from a merchant ship to a large warship was like that of a "rustic beauty" brought from the countryside to compete with "the highborn dames of the court." But Billy was not aware of how out of place he was, and was not aware of the "ambiguous smile" he provoked among some sailors.

The strong male camaraderie between Melville's sailors, centered as it is around the beauty of Billy, is so intense that it approaches a kind of erotic attachment, as Billy is repeatedly compared to beautiful women.

The narrator compares Billy to classical Greek sculpture, though he notes there was another quality in his appearance. An officer on the ship once asked his place of birth and father, and Billy said he didn't know—he was found in a basket on a doorstep in Bristol. The narrator claims that Billy clearly had a noble lineage, as his appearance proved.

The comparison to ancient statuary emphasizes Billy's beauty and associates him with a glorious, idealized innocent ancient past. The narrator (who should not be confused with Melville, who surely has more complicated beliefs) believes that Billy's appearance is proof of his noble character.

The narrator continues to describe Billy, who was intelligent but illiterate. Not at all self-conscious, he was an "upright barbarian," like Adam in the garden of Eden before the Fall. Indeed, the narrator elaborates, good character often appears naturally in men, not from the influence of civilization or convention.

The narrator takes care to describe Billy at length before telling his story, because it is important to know the fundamental nature of his character. He is again compared to a figure from the distant past, this time because of his innocence.

According to the narrator, Billy had "masculine beauty" but did have one flaw, just like "the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne's minor tales." In moments of peril, he would sometimes stutter. The narrator says that this flaw should prove that Billy is a realistic hero, not a figure from some fantastical romance.

The narrator stresses that his story is true, as proven by Billy's one flaw. This insistence on truthfulness has an interesting affect. On one hand, it emphasizes the fact that the story isn't true—it's a fiction made up by Melville! But it also separates Melville from his narrator. Melville made up the story, but the narrator lives in the same world as the characters Melville has made up. The narrator is a character in the story who exists at the same level as the characters, and this makes the narrator's story of these true events unreliable, because why should we assume that the narrator absolutely knows what happened any more than anyone else does. The narrator is creating a coherent narrative based on his speculations regarding these "true" events (just like a historian does). And that is the "history" we are reading. And you as reader can take the narrator's story at face value. But you can also question the narrator's accuracy or knowledge, just as historians disagree. That the story can exist on these multiple levels of accuracy and unreliability at the same time is part of Melville's triumph in writing it.

CHAPTER 3

The narrator's main story takes place in the summer of 1797, when the **Indomitable** joins a naval fleet in the Mediterranean. The narrator explains that not long before there had been a wave of mutinies on British naval ships, including the catastrophic Nore Mutiny, which continued for much longer than most. It was only put down eventually due to the "unswerving loyalty of the marine corps," and because some of those involved in the mutiny became loyal again.

The navy relies on a culture of loyalty, with sailors obediently following their captains. Mutiny is thus extremely dangerous for individual ships and for the navy at large. It can only be put down by its opposite, "unswerving loyalty."

The narrator compares the Nore Mutiny to a contagious fever that affects a healthy man. Like a fever, mutiny spread insidiously among normally loyal sailors. Nonetheless, some of those who had mutinied were able to make up for their behavior by serving valiantly afterwards, earning heroic victories for Admiral Nelson against Napoleon's fleets.

Mutiny spreads through the ties of comradeship that bind sailors—as one turns against the captain the ties of comradeship help turn others, setting up a kind of tension between loyalty to comrades and loyalty to captain. In the case of the Nore Mutiny, justice did not need to be served via punishment, as the sailors served valiantly after the mutiny was put down.

CHAPTER 4

The narrator says that it is difficult not to digress in telling the story and he hopes the reader will follow him along this "bypath" from the main route of the narrative. He says that recent inventions have changed sea warfare, just as the introduction of gunpowder changed warfare on land. But, he insists, there is still a kind of "displayed gallantry" that is important regardless of military technology.

The narrator draws attention to his own digression from the main narrative, making sure the reader is aware of his role in constructing the story. Modern military technology changes the nature of combat, but the narrator still thinks there is a place for the performance, in show if not in fact, of old-fashioned bravery in modern combat.

The narrator describes Admiral Nelson's naval battle at Trafalgar, where he died in victory, contrasting it to the combat of ironsides nowadays. Before entering battle, Nelson wrote his will and dressed in all his medals and military honors. The narrator compares Nelson's glorious behavior to that of heroes from "the great epics and dramas."

The narrator idolizes Admiral Nelson and the glorious military past that he represents, and from which the present era has declined.

CHAPTER 5

Returning to the story of the Nore Mutiny, the narrator says that although the mutiny was put down, the underlying tensions that led to it remained. Captains on numerous ships feared that discontented crews would mutiny. In some extreme cases, lieutenants felt compelled to stand behind their crews with drawn swords while they were working. Nelson, at that time a vice admiral, was reassigned to a difficult ship, in the hopes that his virtue would rub off on the crew and stop them from mutinying.

The navy is in a precarious position because the loyalty that it relies upon in its sailors seems to be dwindling. The tensions leading to mutiny arise in large part from the refusal of individual sailors to subordinate their own interests to the claims of the navy and society. The narrator describes the two ways that the navy sought to limit munities—by force and fear (lieutenant's with drawn swords) and by awing the men with virtuous and gallant captains who command respect despite conditions.

CHAPTER 6

The narrator says that on the **Indomitable** there was no hint of mutiny, as the sailors were loyal to Captain Vere, a bachelor about 40 years old, who was brave and always mindful of his men's welfare. He had an unassuming demeanor—in fact, the narrator says, if he were in civilian garb, one could mistake him for a guest onboard. He had a modest, aristocratic virtue and often daydreamed while looking out at the sea. He was given the nickname "Starry Vere," taken from a line in a poem by Andrew Marvell.

The Indomitable is a well-functioning vessel because all of its sailors are loyal to their brave captain. Captain Vere's appearance can be deceiving: aside from his clothing, he might seem like a civilian, despite the fact that he is an accomplished naval commander.

CHAPTER 7

The narrator tells the reader it's worth saying more about Vere's character, because he plays a major role in the story. Vere was intellectual and loved books, especially history and biography. He had firm convictions that he held on to against "novel opinion." Some officers found Vere odd and anti-social, as he would often speak with obscure allusions. But, the narrator takes care to clarify, this was not out of pretentiousness. It was just Captain Vere's honest display of his noble nature.

The narrator again thinks it's important to know about Vere's true character before learning about his actions in the story. This suggests that people's natures are innate and unchangeable, although other parts of the story may hint otherwise (the fact that the Nore's sailors could mutiny and then become loyal again, for example.) Vere is presented as knowledgeable not out of a desire to appear smart but from true, noble interest.

CHAPTER 8

The narrator describes one of the petty officers of the **Indomitable**, named John Claggart, who was the master-at-arms. This position was originally for the purpose of instructing those onboard in the use of swords and other weapons. But now that the use of gunpowder is widespread, Claggart's real duty is to keep order on the gun-decks.

Modern combat doesn't involve swords, so the master-at-arms is a somewhat anachronistic position on the ship, another example of the contrast between the present and the (more noble) past.

Claggart was 35 years old, tall, and reminiscent of figures from ancient Greek coins—except for his protruding chin. The narrator notes that his brow suggested above-average intelligence and he had dark hair and light skin, in contrast to other bronzed sailors. He looked like a man of high moral quality and, although he seemed to be an Englishman, he had the hint of a possible foreign accent.

Claggart's physical appearance is treated as important information and signifies his intelligence. He looks like a morally upstanding character, but the events that follow will show how deceptive such an appearance can be.

Claggart's origins are uncertain, which prompts the narrator to describe some of the ways the navy obtained sailors. The navy was so desperate for men that London police were known to take questionable characters and send them into naval service. Insolvent debtors would also take to sea to escape their obligations on land. The narrator has even heard that some ships would fill their quota of sailors by drafting men from the jails, though the narrator cannot confirm whether this is true.

The navy is so desperate for sailors that it takes onboard various questionable individuals who are in such dire straights that they are willing (or obligated) to give up their individual rights as civilians. The narrator is upfront about his inability to confirm the truth of the rumor about some sailors coming from the jails.

There are rumors that Claggart came to the navy through one of these disreputable means, but the narrator assures the reader that such rumors are not to be trusted. They come from lower crewmembers who may have grudges against their superior. In any case, Claggart quickly rose through the ranks in the navy to become master-at-arms.

The narrator dismisses the rumors about Claggart, but how can we know that the narrator's own opinion is the truth and not itself another rumor? After all, the narrator seems to believe strongly in outside appearance revealing inner virtue, yet in Claggart this belief is proved wrong. The narrator does not seem entirely reliable—not in the sense that the narrator is making things up, but rather that the narrator may have an oversimplified view of things.

CHAPTER 9

Aboard the **Indomitable**, Billy served in the foretop, with other young men managing the smaller top sails. This duty was relatively leisurely when compared to those below. Billy was always alert and dutiful, because of the first punishment he witnessed on the **Rights-of-Man**. After seeing a misbehaving young sailor getting whipped harshly, Billy resolved never to get into trouble himself.

Billy's reaction to witnessing the whipping shows the potential effectiveness of the naval justice system based on punishments. But this system of justice will later be called into question by the peculiar events of this story.

But on the **Indomitable**, Billy repeatedly found himself in trouble involving minor infractions like stowing his bag incorrectly. Troubled by this, Billy went to an older sailor for advice, known as the Dansker. This sailor had served under Admiral Nelson and had gotten a scar from boarding an enemy ship, earning the nickname "Board-her-in-the-smoke."

The Dansker is admired for the wisdom and experience that he has earned in old age (in contrast to Billy's young naïveté). The fact that he served under Admiral Nelson associates him with the glorious military past that the narrator idolizes.

When the Dansker had first seen Billy on the **Indomitable**, he had "a certain grim internal merriment," perhaps because the naïve Billy was so incongruous on the ship. He was curious as to what would happen to the innocent Billy when he was put in the naval environment without any experience. However, Billy treated the old man with respect, so he took to Billy and liked him. He began calling Billy "Baby Budd" and the nickname became popular among the other sailors on the ship.

Based on Billy's youthful appearance, the Dansker was originally somewhat doubtful of how he would perform on the warship. But, through his respectful behavior, Billy earned the friendship and loyalty of his older shipmate.

Billy told the Dansker about his troubles with minor infractions and asked for advice. The Dansker replied by saying that "Jimmy Legs" (a nickname for Claggart) was "down on" Billy. Billy was confused, because he thought Claggart liked him, but the Dansker insisted that Claggart was "down on" Billy.

In his innocence, Billy is reluctant to believe that one of his comrades aboard the Indomitable would dislike him. Further, Billy cannot understand sly or non-straightforward behavior. Red Whiskers didn't like him openly on the Rights-of-Man. That Billy could understand, and they fought it out. But Claggart operates more clandestinely, and Billy only responds to what he sees, to surface appearances.

CHAPTER 10

One day, in the ship's mess hall, Billy spilled a bowl of soup onto the floor. Claggart was walking by and was going to let someone else handle the issue, but saw that Billy had spilled it and stopped. He looked upset, but then gathered himself and said, sarcastically, "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it too!" Everyone laughed, but Billy didn't grasp Claggart's sarcasm and took this as proof that Claggart actually liked him.

Claggart's remark plays on the supposedly close relationship between physical appearance and behavior. Billy is too naïve to grasp Claggart's sarcasm.

CHAPTER 11

The narrator wonders what reason Claggart could have had for being down on the innocent Billy Budd. The narrator admits it would be easy to invent some incident involving the two before Billy joined the ship, in order to improve the story, but there was no such incident. Claggart seemed to spontaneously dislike Billy.

The narrator again highlights his ability to fabricate aspects of the story, but insists that he is relating a truthful tale. But if it would be easy to invent something here, wouldn't it also be easy to lie elsewhere in the story? Yet, at the same time, the narrator is making the points that there are feelings between people that develop that defy all explanation.

In attempting to explain Claggart's dislike of Billy, the narrator notes that life at sea necessarily puts very different personalities in close contact: at sea, one has to deal with all sorts of people in the confined space of the ship. But even this does not explain Claggart's malicious nature. The narrator digresses about how difficult it is to know one's inner nature. He suggests that Claggart suffered from some "natural depravity" but does not explain more.

Claggart's inner motivations and character are fundamentally a mystery. However, the narrator still sees his actions as arising from his innate nature, from a natural depravity that the narrator does not identify further.

The narrator tells the reader that Claggart exemplifies the most dangerous kind of madman: he is not always mad and so can blend into normal society most of the time. The narrator again concludes that Claggart had some innate evil, a "natural depravity."

Despite his evil character, Claggart has a deceptively normal appearance and behavior. It is this lack of correspondence between appearance and inner character that makes him dangerous. This idea also complicates the narrator's sense of the importance of one's external looks. It might be more accurate to say that you can trust external appearance, except when you can't. It's interesting to speculate whether Melville, the author, does not actually agree with his narrator's focus on physical appearance as proving inner nature.

CHAPTER 12 (NOT IN ALL EDITIONS)

The narrator ponders the legal system and wonders why clergymen are not involved, since they have experience dealing with human nature and have knowledge about morality and human evil. He justifies this digression by saying that it was necessary because Claggart's mysterious, evil nature is central to the story.

This chapter may seem like a digression in the narrator's winding tale, but the issue of justice—and of who ought to decide the fate of accused individuals—will soon become of central importance to the narrative.


CHAPTER 13

The narrator repeats that Claggart was very handsome except for his chin. Billy, though, was much more good looking. The narrator guesses that this may be the reason for Claggart's malice toward Billy. His comment about Billy's handsomeness in the mess hall may have revealed that Claggart was secretly jealous of Billy's better looks. He backs up his theory by noting that envy often leads to hatred.

Claggart's protruding chin may hint that, just as something is out of place in his otherwise attractive appearance, something is not right in his supposedly moral nature. The narrator's focus on physical appearance extends to the idea that perhaps Claggart too is focused on such appearance, and jealous about it.

Claggart's envy was deeper than mere jealousy of good looks, though. According to the narrator, he was envious of Billy's upstanding moral character and innocence. The narrator says that Claggart could hide the evil within him but could not get rid of it. Claggart's awareness of his own inability to be as noble as Billy intensified his antipathy toward Billy.

In the narrator's view, Claggart is envious both of Billy's beauty and the good character it signifies. The description of Claggart becoming even more evil because of his awareness of his inability to get rid of that evil—in other words, Claggart wishes he could be good but his nature doesn't allow him to be, and so in jealous anger he becomes even worse. As an aside, such a psychological dynamic corresponds to descriptions of the characters of those who have been damned, such as, say, Mephistopheles in the play Dr. Faustus, who out of despair for his own inescapable damnation seeks to lure others to hell.

CHAPTER 14

The narrator notes that great passion does not always arise from great circumstances, but can be provoked by trivial things, like Billy's spilled soup. The narrator thinks that Claggart must have interpreted the soup as a deliberate affront to him, because of what Squeak (a corporal serving under Claggart) had told him.

The narrator, after initially saying that Claggart's hatred toward Billy was a total mystery, now continues to speculate about its cause. This can be taken as a metaphor for how all humankind operates, always making up stories to explain what they see happening in the world and between other people. Always trying to explain the unexplainable mysteries of the world.

Claggart had been ordering Squeak to carry out small pranks on Billy and Squeak, guessing that Claggart didn't like Billy for some reason, had been making up rumors that Billy was insulting Claggart behind his back. Thus, the narrator thinks, Claggart thought the spilled soup was a sign of disrespect and made the event into a much more significant issue than it really was.

Claggart's lack of loyalty to his comrade Billy has expanding effects. Squeak senses Claggart's dislike and spreads false rumors to satisfy Claggart's feelings, thus increasing those feelings. And, at the same time, false rumors eat away at the bonds of comradeship that should ideally unite sailors aboard the same ship.

The narrator guesses that Claggart's persecution of Billy was originally intended as a way of making a trial of his innocent character, to see how Billy would react. But as it did not lead to any kind of reaction worth reprimanding, Claggart became frustrated. The spilling of the soup offered Claggart a reason to dislike Billy, and he gladly seized upon it as justification for his animosity toward the innocent young sailor.

In seeking an explanation for Claggart's behavior, the narrator keeps trying out new stories, iterating from one to the next as he tries to find one that makes sense. Now the narrator sees Claggart as essentially frustrated by Billy's innocent nature, as disbelieving such a nature could exist and wanting to put it to a test to prove it. Yet as Claggart's test failed to disprove Billy's innocence, Claggart did not give up but instead became even angrier, as now Billy did not fit into Claggart's view of the world (which held that such innocence didn't exist, possibly because Claggart himself lacks any such innocence). Claggart's hatred of Billy does therefore (as the narrator now sees it) doesn't *arise from any specific action like the spilling of the soup; rather, that action is an excuse to justify the dislike Claggart instinctively feels for Billy and Billy's innocence.*

CHAPTER 15

Not many days after the soup incident, the narrator says that something worse happened to Billy. He was sleeping in the upper deck one night and was awakened by someone, who told Billy to go meet him in another part of the ship. As Billy was not the sort of person to say no to any request, he went to meet with the unknown man.

It is not in Billy's nature to say no to the request of a fellow shipmate. However, any loyalty owed to this unknown comrade has a limit, as we will see when he asks Billy to go against his loyalty to Captain Vere.

Billy went to meet the man, whom he did not recognize in the dark. The man told Billy that there were a large number of sailors on-board who had been conscripted into service. He asked Billy, "Couldn't you—help—at a pinch?" Billy asked what he meant and the stranger offered him two guineas, though it is unclear what exactly he was asking for.

While it's never explicitly stated, the unnamed man here seems to be hinting that he wants Billy's help in planning a mutiny, and seeks to gain Billy's comradeship by explaining that he and other share a past with Billy—they've all been forced *to join the navy. In essence, the man is suggesting that those forced to give up their individual rights to join the navy should forcibly reassert those rights through mutiny. By offering Billy money, he encourages Billy to value his own prosperity above the well-being of the ship as a whole.*

Billy refused the coins and told the stranger to go back to his post, or else he'd throw him overboard, stuttering in his nervousness. Another sailor, awakened by the ruckus, asked Billy what was going on. Billy said he simply found someone away from his post and told him to return to his proper area.

Billy remains loyal to his captain and ship by returning the coin and threatening to throw the other soldier overboard. Yet he also shows his camaraderie to that same sailor by making up a lie and not turning him in. Billy stands right in the middle of the tension between loyalty to captain and camaraderie with his fellow sailors. Incidentally, it's worth pointing out that it is never clear whether this is another "test" from Claggart or whether the mystery sailor really is trying to put together a mutiny. This scene further establishes Billy's stutter, which will come into play later.

Another awakened sailor nicknamed Red Pepper doubted Billy's story and said he'd like to punish Billy and whomever he was talking to. However, the surrounding sailors believed Billy's story because, as the narrator notes, sailors are particularly annoyed when people are not in their proper, assigned places and so sympathized with Billy reprimanding the other sailor.

Red Pepper exemplifies the naval habit of swift punishment for any infractions. However, the other sailors are sympathetic to Billy because of the importance placed on every sailor's specific duties aboard the ship—in the fact that all sailors depend on the others for their survival. Camaraderie between the men therefore arises from the fact that they all hold each other's lives in each other's hands.

CHAPTER 16

Billy was confused by this nighttime incident, which made him uneasy. The next day, he saw the man from that night and was able to recognize him in the light of day as an after-guardsman. At the same time, though, he was uncertain whether it was really the same person, because the after-guardsmen appears genial and young, not like a conspirator. The man recognized Billy as well, and greeted him pleasantly one day. This surprised Billy, who didn't know how to respond.

Billy is unsure of whether the nice-looking after-guardsman is the same person who was possibly planning a mutiny, because he is inclined to see the man's appearance as indicative of his character. Billy doesn't know how to respond because the goings-on on the ship have become so murky—is the sailor just a nice guy, or is he still trying to win Billy over to mutiny?

Billy knew that he should report the after-guardsman, but also feared being a tattletale. One night he mentioned the event to the Dansker, but did not give all the details of the story. The Dansker saw the story as proof that "Jimmy Legs" was "down on" Billy. Billy was confused and asked what Claggart had to do with it.

Billy faces a conflict between his loyalty to the captain, which would dictate that he tell Vere about the possible mutiny, and his loyalty to his fellow shipmates, which makes him hesitant to be a tattletale. The Dansker, meanwhile, sees all of this as part of Claggart's hatred of Billy, suggesting that Claggart is behind the whole thing as an effort to entrap Billy. It's easy to take this as being true, but is it? We as readers have only the Dansker's unsubstantiated word to go on.

The Dansker, though, didn't say. The narrator says that the old man's experience at sea had taught him to stay out of such matters, as he had learned "that bitter prudence which never interferes in aught and never gives advice."

The Dansker has gained wisdom through experience. A figure from the honorable military past, he knows not to get involved in Billy's affairs. But there is an interesting tension here, as well—shouldn't camaraderie compel the Dansker to want to help Billy? But the Dansker's sense of camaraderie does not extend to giving advice, to personal loyalty. It is more of an impersonal camaraderie with the group of sailors.

CHAPTER 17

Billy Budd was reluctant to believe that Claggart disliked him. The narrator characterizes Billy as naïve, but not unintelligent. He simply lacked experience, especially in dealing with people with evil natures. According to the narrator, this is common with sailors, who as a group "are marked by juvenility" and are used to following orders without questioning them.

The narrator definitively describes not only the inherent nature of Billy, but also of sailors in general.

CHAPTER 18

Billy continued to notice Claggart smiling at him and acting nicely toward him. However, there were other indications that Claggart was not so fond of Billy. Upon seeing Billy, Claggart would often have a look of melancholy or sorrow mixed with yearning and at times would show an odd red glint in his eyes. In his innocent ignorance, Billy did not notice any of this.

Claggart tries not to display his inner dislike of Billy, but there are still outward signs of his animosity toward the innocent sailor, which Billy does not notice. It's worth thinking about the fact, though, that a look of "melancholy or sorrow mixed with yearning" and even "an odd red glint" in the eye aren't definitive signs of hatred, and to wonder if the narrator really is reliable.

The ship's armorer and captain of the hold, both messmates of Claggart, also habitually looked at Billy with critical glances, but Billy did not think this was suspicious and his handsomeness and good nature maintained his popularity among most of the sailors on the ship.

Is Claggart turning his messmates against innocent Billy? (Though given later events one might also wonder if Claggart has gotten wind of the after-guardsmen's approach to Billy and therefore suspects Billy of connection to a mutiny, and his messmates therefore suspect Billy too.) Billy doesn't think that his comrades onboard the ship would turn against him, especially as his good behavior and appearance have ensured the goodwill of most of the sailors.

The after-guardsman who had approached Billy in the night behaved kindly toward Billy whenever the two saw each other. The narrator says that readers may think that Billy should have asked the after-guardsman his purpose in asking for Billy's help, or should have asked other sailors to see if he could figure out what was going on. Such questioning, though, was out of line with Billy's nature. Meanwhile, Claggart's hatred for Billy was growing, such that "something must come of it."

Like Claggart, the after-guardsman behaved with a deceptively polite demeanor toward Billy. The narrator sees Billy's innocent nature as determining the course of his actions. By guessing the reaction of his readers, the narrator emphasizes his own role as a storyteller. Once again, such narratorial intrusion may raise at least a partial suspicion in the reader about whether the narrator's story is reliable—because even if unintentional, such narration provides an explanation that may not match up with what the reader would have come to without it. The narrator explains how Billy's silence comes about because of his innocence, but a reader who disregards the narrator might wonder if perhaps Claggart, might see (whether rightly or wrongly) Billy's silence as arising from something more nefarious.

CHAPTER 19

For some time after the night when Billy was awakened by the after-guardsman, nothing important happened. The narrator describes the **Indomitable**, which—on account of both its sailing capabilities and the character of Captain Vere—was often sent on missions by itself. During one mission, separated from the naval fleet, the **Indomitable** encountered an enemy vessel and pursued it. The enemy ship, though, escaped.

While the details regarding the Indomitable's pursuit of the ship may at first seem unimportant, it has an important effect: it isolates the ship from the rest of the fleet. Such isolation does two things: it makes the threat of mutiny more dire because there are no other ships to help put a mutiny down if it should occur. It also puts any decisions regarding justice in solely the hands of the captain of the ship.

Shortly after this pursuit, Claggart paid a visit to Captain Vere. It was unusual for someone to approach the captain like this, so the captain knew that there was some exceptional reason for Claggart coming to him. Upon seeing Claggart, the captain had "a peculiar expression," signifying a vague distaste for the master-at-arms.

Vere's expression immediately reveals his inner reaction to seeing Claggart approach him, though, again, this is an example of the narrator interpreting Vere's expression.

Claggart began speaking to the captain as if he didn't want to be the bearer of bad news, but felt compelled to tell him that he knew of a sailor aboard the **Indomitable** who was dangerous and was gathering together like-minded sailors who had been conscripted into service.

Claggart acts like the consummate loyal sailor, reluctant to speak ill of his comrades but compelled to by his sense of duty. As the narrator describes it, this behavior is all a lie—and the narrator's compelling story certainly makes a strong case that Claggart is lying.

Claggart told Captain Vere that he had been suspicious of this sailor for a while, but that now his suspicions had been confirmed. He felt he had a responsibility to alert the captain to this, given the recent spate of mutinies in the British navy. At the reference to mutiny, the captain became uncomfortable, and did not even let Claggart say the name of the Nore Mutiny out loud.

Claggart again frames his suspicions in the terms of loyalty and duty, trying to take advantage of Captain Vere's fears of mutiny. But it is Claggart who is here contravening his loyalty to his fellow sailor Billy. Yet what if you took Claggart at face value: there is also a compelling narrative that Claggart always suspected Billy's look of innocence as being false, that he suspected him and tested him, that he got wind of Billy meeting with the after-guardsmen and then suspected Billy. Nothing but the narrator's speculations contradict that second narrative. And it's important to grant that the narrator might be right! But it's also important to recognize that the world is complicated, and maybe the narrator's speculations are wrong.

Captain Vere considered his options for responding to a possible mutiny, but also regarded Claggart's claims with some suspicion. Something in the manner of Claggart's speech reminded him of a dishonest witness he once saw in a trial. He asked Claggart to identify the suspected sailor, and Claggart told him that it was Billy Budd.

Captain Vere must try to decide whether Claggart's report is a mere rumor, a truthful account, or a deliberate lie. To do so Vere relies on his impressions of Claggart, and is suspicious based on Claggart's surface resemblance to a dishonest witness he once saw. Now it is Vere who must try to interpret inner truth based on surface appearance.

Citing Billy's handsomeness and general popularity on the ship, Captain Vere was incredulous, but Claggart told him that Billy's nice appearance and demeanor hid a more sinister nature. The narrator says that Captain Vere had taken notice of Billy when he joined the ship and complimented Lieutenant Ratcliffe on finding "such a fine specimen of the *genus homo*." He had been pleased with Billy's service on the **Indomitable** so far and thought he was an excellent sailor.

Captain Vere is incredulous that someone with Billy's appearance and behavior could plot mutiny. Claggart's claim that Billy's appearance is deceptive is ironic, since it is actually Claggart's demeanor that is disingenuous. (Though, again, one can choose to disbelieve the narrator's interpretation and see Claggart as being honest).

Captain Vere was inclined to disbelieve Claggart and angrily asked if he had any proof for "so foggy a tale." Claggart "alleged certain words and acts," but Captain Vere was still doubtful. Vere at first thought to ask Claggart to substantiate his claims in some way, but then it occurred to him that in doing so the rumor of possible mutiny would get out among the men and perhaps *inspire* a mutiny. Therefore, choosing instead to try to settle the matter in private, the captain sent a sailor to tell Billy he was wanted in the captain's cabin and ordered Claggart to enter the cabin when Billy arrived.

Not wanting to put too much stock in a rumor, Vere asks for proof. Yet the fear of mutiny is so great that he fears that even the appearance of a mutiny taking place, even if it isn't, might actually create a real mutiny! He fears appearance will change reality. So Vere summons Billy to privately appear with Claggart before him. As a result of his fears of letting out any rumor of a mutiny, Vere therefore puts himself in the place of trying to figure out what is true based on no evidence, but just what the two men say. Vere will try to interpret based on the two men's words and appearance while speaking.

CHAPTER 20

Billy was surprised to be summoned to the captain's cabin, but had no idea that he might be in trouble. In fact, he thought the captain might be promoting him to the position of his coxswain. When he arrives and he, Captain Vere, and Claggart were alone in the cabin, though, Claggart repeated his accusation against Billy.

Billy is so assured of his good standing on the ship and of his own loyal behavior that he thinks he is going to be promoted. Claggart repeats his untrue accusations. (Though, again, one might ask why Claggart would bring absolutely unsubstantiated claims against Billy to Vere if he didn't believe them? Did he truly hope to convince Vere without any evidence? Would simple malice against Billy be worth the risk of such an action?)

Billy went pale at hearing the accusation and was so shocked he couldn't speak. Captain Vere told him to speak and defend himself, but Billy was so surprised by the accusation that he could produce nothing but "strange dumb gesturing and gurgling."

To someone unfamiliar with Billy's character and speech problem, his behavior might appear to be that of a guilty man.

Captain Vere had known a young schoolmate who suffered from a speech impediment similar to Billy's, so he recognized Billy's inability to speak as mere nervousness, rather than a sign of guilt. He encouraged Billy to take his time in replying. Billy tried to say something but still couldn't, and suddenly "his right arm shot out," hitting Claggart, who fell to the floor.

Vere is able to recognize that Billy's inability to speak is not a sign of guilt. The implication is that Billy, unable to communicate because of his stutter, is unable to stop him from responding in some way, and so he does so violently, at odds with his normally gentle nature.

Captain Vere was stunned, and his former fatherly demeanor toward Billy was "replaced by the military disciplinarian." He ordered Billy to go to another room and wait there and then sent another sailor to bring the ship's surgeon to his cabin. The surgeon arrived and pronounced Claggart to be dead.

Captain Vere immediately puts aside his personal fondness for Billy and assumes his role within the naval community, as a military commander.

Captain Vere was overcome with emotion and cried out that Claggart was "struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" The captain gathered himself and told the surgeon what had happened. After moving Claggart's body to a compartment, he ordered the surgeon to bring the ship's lieutenants and captain of marines to him in order to form a drumhead court.

Even as Billy has just killed someone, Captain Vere insists on his angelic nature. The fact that an "angel" must be hanged encapsulates the difficult decision of how to mete out justice in this case, in which someone who Vere believes to be innocent has committed accidental murder. This question will preoccupy Vere and his court in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 21

The narrator wonders if Captain Vere made the right decision in calling for a trial immediately. The surgeon, for example, thought that it would be better to confine Billy Budd onboard and wait for the navy's admiral to pass judgment on him. He even wondered if Captain Vere had suddenly come "unhinged." Still, the surgeon would not disobey the captain's direct orders and gathered the lieutenants and captain of marines, all of whom also thought that Billy's fate should be decided by the admiral.

The narrator questions whether it was just for Captain Vere to put Billy on trial immediately, rather than waiting for an admiral to pass judgment once the ship had returned to fleet, as others onboard would have wished. The surgeon disagrees with Captain Vere (and even thinks Vere may be mad; another instance of the someone interpreting actions and seeing something deeper than appearances) but, as a loyal sailor, still will not disobey a direct order.

CHAPTER 22

The narrator says that there is no clear distinction between sanity and insanity, and so says that it is up to the reader to decide if Captain Vere was suffering from some bout of madness (as the surgeon momentarily thought). The narrator emphasizes the horrible timing of the event (right after numerous mutinies in the navy) and notes how Claggart and Billy have reversed their roles: the innocent victim Billy is now the perpetrator of a crime, while the evil Claggart has become the victim.

The narrator lets the possibility of Vere's madness remain a rumor of uncertain veracity. The reversal of Claggart and Billy's roles shows how mixed up the case is and how difficult (if not impossible) coming to a just conclusion in the trial will be.

According to the narrator, Captain Vere was not authorized to decide the matter on the "primitive basis" of right and wrong, but had to follow the law. Vere feared that if word of Billy's deed reached the crew, it might stir up dissent and possibly lead to mutiny. Thus, he wanted to handle the matter quickly and secretly.

The narrator draws a contrast between the justice of the law, which Vere must follow, and "primitive" right and wrong. Vere's course of action is also determined by a practical concern to maintain the loyal morale of his sailors, and the fear that the story around Billy's action—the accusation of mutiny and Billy's violent reaction—might produce a real mutiny.

Captain Vere chose the first lieutenant, the captain of marines, and the sailing master to serve in the drumhead court. He had Billy brought in and Captain Vere himself served as the trial's only witness. Captain Vere gave his testimony, describing exactly what had happened with Claggart and Billy. The three members of the court were shocked to hear that Billy had killed Claggart.

The members of the court rely on the truthful accounts of Captain Vere and Billy to make their decision. They are shocked that someone with as gentle a nature as Billy could kill someone.

Billy then spoke. He said that Captain Vere had spoken the truth, that he had not meant to kill Claggart, and that he had no malice toward Claggart. However, he said that Claggart had lied: he never planned any mutiny. Captain Vere then said he believed Billy.

Billy tells the truth, exposing Claggart's lies. Because of Billy's previous loyal behavior and good nature, Captain Vere believes him. (Again, though, one could argue that Claggart may too have been innocent: he may not have knowingly lied; he may have truly suspected Billy).

The court then asked Billy if he knew of any possible mutiny developing onboard the **Indomitable**. Billy paused and debated saying something, but thought of his own personal honor and duty to his shipmates. Not wanting to be "an informer against one's own shipmates," he answered that he did not know of any plans of mutiny.

Billy again faces a difficult decision: he can either betray his shipmate and report him to the court, or fail to carry out his duty to his captain by not mentioning the after-guardsman. Billy chooses silence, and in doing so becomes a liar and, if there is a mutiny, a kind of accessory to it. It is ironic that Billy will be executed for innocently committing murder when he did indeed lie in court about a possible mutiny.

Billy was then asked why Claggart maliciously lied against him. Billy responded that he had no idea, and his confusion may have seemed to some like a sign of guilt, but the narrator says that it was merely the result of Billy's ignorance of the workings of evil. Captain Vere stepped in for Billy, saying that no one could know the answer to that question but Claggart, and insisted that it was irrelevant anyway.

Billy's confusion might be taken as a sign of guilt, but it is really just an indication of his innocent, naïve nature. (Once more, one could respond to the narrator's intrusion about the meaning behind Billy's confusion and wonder if perhaps Billy really was guilty, though the evidence really does seem to point against such a conclusion.) Vere's dismissal of what could have motivated Claggart is interesting, as much of the story has been devoted to trying and not really succeeding at answering exactly that question. But in matters of justice Vere is asserting that it is not motivation that matters—it is not the thoughts of the individual that matter—but what actually happened.

Captain Vere then said that the court should only consider Billy's deed itself, and that the killing of Claggart demanded an equal punishment—death. Since Claggart was dead, Captain Vere said that his motivations would have to remain a mystery, and the court could only reach a verdict based on Billy's action.

Captain Vere puts aside his individual fondness for Billy and wishes to adhere strictly to the law. He advocates a conception of justice based only on Billy's action, though he is also influenced by a practical desire to conclude the trial quickly.

The first lieutenant asked if Billy had anything more to say for himself. He didn't. Billy was taken out of the room, and the members of the court stood in silence. Captain Vere finally spoke, telling the other members of the court that he knew they were feeling a conflict between "military duty" and "moral scruple." He said that they had to make a practical decision based on maritime law.

Captain Vere and the court must choose between their personal moral feelings and the law imposed by society. Vere encourages the members of the court to make a decision based on the law alone.

Vere summarized their predicament as follows: Billy killed the ship's master-at-arms and deserved the punishment of death. But, at the same time, the court felt that they could not "adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God." He concluded that it was the court's duty to follow the law, "however pitilessly that law may operate."

Vere admits that the question of justice in this case is a complicated one. How could someone as innocent as Billy deserve death? Nonetheless, he tells the court to follow the law, out of his sense of duty to the British navy.

Captain Vere's long argument did more to agitate the troubled court than settle their minds, according to the narrator. Vere then reviewed the facts of the case and the law, telling the court that they had two options: "condemn or let go." A lieutenant asked if they could convict Billy but not punish him, but Captain Vere said that if they did not hold to the law, the ship's crew would learn of it, lose respect for maritime law, and might move closer to mutiny.

The lieutenant wanting to convict but not punish seeks a loophole that would allow honoring justice while also recognizing the facts of the individual before the court. But punishment is a crucial part of the naval justice system, as it deters other sailors from committing crimes. Captain Vere worries that if they bend the law, sailors might be more inclined to behave disloyally, nearing mutiny.

Captain Vere left the court alone to reach their decision. He tells the reader that it is easier to reason about how a battle should have been fought than to figure out what to actually do in the heat of battle. Similarly, it may have been harder for the court to reach a decision than it is for a reader to pass judgment now. Billy Budd was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging.

The narrator leaves the question of whether Billy was justly convicted very open-ended. He is sympathetic to Billy, who is fundamentally innocent, but also notes that it is more difficult to reach a decision in the middle of such a matter, especially as Captain Vere and others had to weigh practical considerations of possible mutiny. The appearance of things shifts when you look back them from when you were in the midst of them.

CHAPTER 23

Captain Vere had the task of informing Billy of his sentence. He went to the room where Billy was being held and the narrator admits he does not know what Captain Vere told Billy. He says it would have been in accordance with Vere's nature to tell Billy the role he (Vere) played in Billy's conviction. When Captain Vere left the room, he looked greatly pained, and the narrator thinks that he suffered even more than Billy from the result of the trial.

The narrator admits the limits of his knowledge, but guesses what might have happened between Captain Vere and Billy based on their natures and what he can interpret from facial expressions afterward. The narrator uses these clues to construct the narrative. Would someone else, witnessing the same things, have interpreted and told the story differently?

CHAPTER 24

The narrator says that about an hour and a half passed between when Claggart and Billy first entered Captain Vere's cabin and when Captain Vere informed Billy of his sentence. In this time, some rumors began to spread among the crew about what was happening. The entire crew was called to deck for an announcement.

Rumors spread quickly on the naval vessel, though it is unclear at times whether the narrator's own story is any more truthful than such rumors.

Captain Vere told the crew what had happened, and then Claggart was given a proper burial at sea. Captain Vere had no further contact with Billy after informing him of his sentence, and those guarding Billy were told to let no one speak to him, in order to minimize any resentment arising from Billy's sentence.

Captain Vere is worried that sailors' sympathy for their comrade Billy might lead to dissent and disobedience, possibly putting the ship in danger of mutiny.

CHAPTER 25

The narrator describes Billy being kept watch over in an upper gun deck, lying between two guns. The narrator notes that Billy's white clothes gleamed in contrast to the nighttime darkness of his surroundings, which were lit by two small lanterns. Billy's earlier expression of agony and dismay was gone, and he now looked restful and serene.

Not only Billy's facial expression, but even his outward appearance through his shining clothes, demonstrates his inner peace and innocence.

The ship's chaplain approached Billy, but felt that he could not say anything to him, because Billy looked so peaceful. The narrator says that Billy was unafraid of death, because he was like an uncivilized barbarian, and the fear of death is "more prevalent in highly civilized communities."

Billy's innocence links him to the distant, uncivilized past, and the narrator lauds those times as being somehow nobler than the present with their lack of the fear of death.

The chaplain attempted to convey to Billy some idea of death and of salvation. Billy listened politely, but did not take a real interest in the Chaplain's words. The chaplain did not mind this, thinking "innocence was even a better thing than religion," and kissed Billy on the cheek before leaving.

Although it is the chaplain's duty as a member of the church to speak with Billy about death, he makes the judgment as an individual that Billy is so innocent he is not in need of spiritual help. Billy might be described as existing in a pre-fall state, as being a kind of Adam before sin entered the garden of Eden, and therefore needing no religion to absolve him of sin he does not have. Again, though, one might wonder if the narrator's extreme idealization of Billy here is truly indicative of the real Billy (who did, after all, lie about the possibly mutiny to the court).

The narrator says that it was out of the chaplain's power to do anything to stop Billy's death, even as he saw Billy's great innocence. To try to do something would be a transgression of his role on the **Indomitable**. Moreover, the narrator claims that the very existence of a chaplain on a warship is incongruous, because the chaplain is a minister of peace aboard a vessel of war. His real purpose on the ship, according to the narrator, is to sanctify the "brute Force" of the warship.

While the chaplain individually might feel that Billy does not deserve death, he would not transgress his duty as a member of the Indomitable. The narrator's cynical view of the purpose of the chaplain aboard the warship provides another example of society curbing individuals, as the navy prevents the chaplain from actually ministering peace onboard.

CHAPTER 26

At four in the morning, the crew was called to deck to witness Billy's execution. The chaplain was with Billy in his final moments, but the narrator notes that the chaplain did not so much speak the Gospel as display it "in his aspect and manner toward [Billy.]" Billy's final words were "God bless Captain Vere!" and the entire crew repeated these words after him.

The chaplain scarcely needs to speak, as his "aspect and manner" clearly display his feelings. Billy is loyal until the end, as his last words reaffirm his obedience to his captain, and evince his willingness to sacrifice his own rights, and life, to the needs of that captain and, by extension, the navy and his king.

Billy was hanged, and at that precise moment the sun illuminated the fog hanging over the water, so that Billy's body hung in the light "with a soft glory as of **the fleece of the Lamb of God** seen in mystical vision." To the amazement of all on deck, Billy's body was perfectly still when he was hanged.

The narrator relates the almost miraculous appearance of Billy's execution, marked especially by the remarkable perfect stillness of his hanging body—but given sailors' propensity to exaggerate, is it possible the narrator's admiration for Billy is influencing his version of the tale?

CHAPTER 27

A few days after Billy's death, the ship's purser and the surgeon discussed the event in the mess hall. The purser claims that the stillness of Billy's body during his execution is proof of Billy's remarkable will power. The surgeon, though, says that a body's movement while being hanged is the result of involuntary muscle spasms. Billy's stillness, then, was unintentional and no proof of extraordinary will power.

The purser and the surgeon offer two different versions of what happened when Billy died. The scientific surgeon is committed to objective truth, whereas the purser is more willing to see something extraordinary in Billy's death. It is unclear which interpretation of the event is true, and which is more of a rumor. Different witnesses remember an event differently. And that realization can be applied to the entire story told in Billy Budd (as this analysis has pointed out in previous chapters). Someone other than the narrator might have come to very different conclusions about what happened between Billy and Claggart than his narrator has done.

The purser continues to debate the issue with the surgeon, emphasizing the extraordinariness of Billy's stillness. The surgeon refuses to see the event as phenomenal, as the purser would have it, and tells the surgeon that will power is "a term not yet included in the lexicon of science."

The surgeon refuses to see Billy's stillness as one final outward appearance of his gentle inner nature, because he is committed to (or is he constrained by?) the rigid principles of science.

CHAPTER 28

The narrator returns to the moment of Billy's death. Right after his execution, a strange murmur started to grow among the crew, until Captain Vere ordered for everyone to return to their posts. The narrator calls the command "strategic," and abrupt.

Captain Vere senses that the death of such a dear comrade might stir dissent among the ranks of sailors, so he quickly returns them all to their duties.

Billy was then given a burial, and the narrator describes another strange murmur arising at the moment Billy's body was slid into the sea, blending with "another inarticulate sound proceeding from certain larger seafowl." Many of the sailors were superstitious and saw this noise from the seafowl as very significant. The sailors then returned to their duties around the ship.

The sailors are willing to interpret the sounds of the seafowl as an almost miraculous expression of sympathy from nature. The narrator neither confirms nor denies whether there is any truth to this, or whether the birds' noise was simply a coincidence.

CHAPTER 29

The narrator tells the reader that "the symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction" cannot be had in a more truthful tale such as this one. Thus, he will not be able to give his story a good ending. He says that the story's final three chapters serve as "something in a way of a sequel" to the main story of Billy's death.

The narrator takes great care to distinguish his story from fictional tales, and, again, this serves to separate the narrator from Melville. Melville wrote the fiction that is Billy Budd. The narrator was part of that creation, and lives in the world of the novel. That means that for the narrator, the story is true; but it also means that the narrator is just as fallible as any of the other characters in the story and the narrative he relates should therefore be treated with the same skepticism you would treat any other story you might hear from a friend or were you, say, serving on a trial as a jury. The narrative we read in Billy Budd is the narrator's version of the story, the narrator's interpretation of the motivations of the characters based on their actions.

After Billy's death, the **Indomitable** engaged in combat with a French vessel named the Athéiste. During the fight, Captain Vere was hit with a musket ball and mortally wounded. Just before dying, he uttered the words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd," though the narrator says that the words were not said remorsefully.

In the final moments of his honorable death, Captain Vere remembered his dear comrade Billy. But the narrator specifies that his words were not remorseful—Vere still felt that he made the necessary decision in executing Billy. The death of Vere also removes the last true participant in the story. There is no one left to go to if one want's to get "primary research" regarding the story of Billy Budd.

CHAPTER 30

A few weeks after Billy's death, the story of Claggart and Billy was reported in a naval chronicle. The account claimed that Claggart learned of a plot aboard the ship and reported the plot's ringleader, Billy Budd, who then "vindictively stabbed" Claggart. The story emphasizes "the extreme depravity" of Billy and describes Claggart as "respectable and discreet." The narrator says that this is the only record of the events of this story.

Despite its authority as a supposedly truthful news outlet, this naval chronicle ends up reporting a false version of Billy's story. Yet, if even official reports are susceptible to the proliferation of rumors among sailors, how are we to evaluate the accuracy of the narrator's own tale? And if the newspaper report unjustly vilified Billy, might this narrator's have unjustly vilified Claggart. Should a reader truly believe that Billy was all good and Claggart all evil? Or might Claggart have been more complicated, wrongly but honestly suspecting Billy, for instance?

CHAPTER 31

According to the narrator, the crew of the **Indomitable** treated the spar from which Billy was hanged as a monument. A piece of it was as valuable to them as a **piece of the cross** on which Christ was crucified.

The crew's camaraderie is so strong that they treat Billy as a kind of Christ figure, largely based on his appearance and the story of his death. The comparison also suggests that Billy did not deserve to die and was unjustly executed.

The sailors remembered Billy fondly and memorialized him in a song that became a sailors' ballad. The narrator gives the words to the ballad, entitled "Billy in the Darbies," which narrates the final moments of Billy's life sympathetically and tragically.

In contrast to the naval chronicle, the sailors memorialize their comrade in a ballad. While such songs do not have a reputation for veracity, "Billy in the Darbies" is in some ways truer to the reality of Billy's death than the official report in the chronicle.

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