
Billy Budd: Novel Critical Analysis

Billy Budd, Sailor is a novella written by Herman Melville that left unfinished due to his demise in 1891 and was finally published in 1924. It belongs to the genre of adventure fiction; it is a sea story about Billy Budd, a “handsome sailor” who accidentally kills his false accuser, John Claggart, and this fact will lead to unfortunate consequences. The time frame of the story is between the last decade of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth one during the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars between England and France.

The narration begins in the summer of 1791, soon after two major mutinies, the Spithead and the Great Munity at Nore. The action takes place with a naval warship called the Indomitable on board on the Mediterranean Sea that is looking for a sailor to go to war. So, the boarding officer, Lieutenant Ratcliff recruits the young sailor Billy Budd from aboard the Rights-of-Man, a merchant ship. Instead of protesting, Billy follows the boarding officer of the Indomitable. He finds out that Billy was enormously admired in his last ship and was considered a peacemaker. Billy is a twenty-one beautiful man who is nicknamed 'Baby' as well as 'the Handsome Sailor'. He is orphan, illiterate and a simple good-natured person, but he has a flaw: he stutters when he gets nervous. He is an innocent and hard-working person that serves dutifully as a foretopman. There he becomes a popular hero, even the favourite of The Captain Vere, universally well-liked and respected except for Claggart.

The Captain Vere nicknamed “Starry Vere”, is a bachelor aged forty that picks up a new master-at-arms for the voyage named John Claggart. Claggart is a thirty-five malevolent person, probably naturally depraved that is envious and jealous of Billy Budd because of his beauty, for his innocence as well as general popularity.

One day on the deck, Billy witnesses a violent lashing of a crewmember, and he is so horrified that decides to fulfil his duties well to avoid a similar fate. Nevertheless, he finds himself getting into insignificant trouble with matters such as the stowage of his bag or something amiss in his hammock. Thereby, he opts for asking a veteran for a piece of advice looking for wise counsel due to his long experience. This man is The Dansker, an old sailor nicknamed 'Board-Her-in-the-Smoke,' and warns him that Claggart is down on him. Despite the Dansker's warnings, Billy cannot believe what the aged sailor asserts but continues to think about why Claggart might dislike him. Shortly thereafter, during a dinner, Billy accidentally spills his soup pan on the floor of the ship's dining room just as Claggart is walking by and he makes a hilarious joke about the accident so that everyone among the crew laughs at him. This fact is a hint that describes the moment when Claggart starts to hate Billy.

After that, a guardsman wakes up Billy, who is sleeping on the deck, wanting to speak with him in secret. He asks Billy for help with a group of impressed sailors offering him two guineas. Whatever is being asked, Billy refuses the money. He is puzzled due to this incident and again asks the Dansker for advice. The Dansker confirms him that Claggart is behind these troubles as he is against Billy; nevertheless, he does not want to believe this.

Somewhat later, after a brief conflict with an enemy frigate, Claggart approaches Captain Vere and warns him that one sailor aboard is a dangerous man who is planning something

dangerous among the crew, a kind of mutiny. Vere impressed asks him to name that person, what Claggart responds that person is Billy Budd.

The Captain is surprised with this accusation due to Billy's good behaviour and decides to join Billy and Claggart together into his cabin so that Claggart repeats his accusation again in front of Billy. Billy is amazed and Vere orders Billy to defend himself; however, Billy is tongue-tied and cannot find his voice because of his defect of stammering. In his extreme frustration, he suddenly punches Claggart on the forehead and he falls to the deck. Then, Vere calls the surgeon who confirms that Claggart is dead.

Afterwards, Captain Vere, despite his love and admiration for Billy and his knowledge that the act was unintentional, immediately calls a drumhead court to tell what has happened and decide Billy's case. Vere, being the only witness, gives a testimony of the relevant events to the jury and then, Billy answers the court's questions admitting killing Claggart, but maintaining his innocence of intention and denying any involvement of mutiny. The jury and the Captain have two options: condemn him or let him go. After a tense period of deliberation, the jury decides to proceed under the naval law after being convincing by Vere despite his beliefs in Billy's moral innocence. The court finds Billy guilty and sentences him to death by hanging from the yardarm the next morning.

Later, Claggart's body is buried at sea and the rest of the crew is prepared to see Billy's hanging at dawn. The following day, the crew watches him ready to die and they hear an echo with Billy's last words praying God to bless Captain Vere. The entire crew repeats the phrase and Billy dies with a surprising sense of serenity as the rise of the dawn.

A few weeks later, the Indomitable engages in battle with the French warship, the Atheist, during which Captain Vere is hit by a musket-ball from the enemy's main cabin. The enemy is finally captured and successfully the Indomitable takes an English port near Gibraltar.

There, Captain Vere wounded is put ashore, but at the end, he passes away and he is heard murmuring Billy's name over and over again.

The novel ends with the legend of Billy Budd memorialized among the sailors. Despite a naval chronicle reporting Billy Budd as a mutinous murderer who killed maliciously Claggart with a knife, the sailors think differently and venerate Billy with a ballad in his memory named "Billy in the Darbies".