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English 1302

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Perception

In *Billy Budd, Sailor* by Melville Herman, the author utilizes the characters to demonstrate the discrepancy between the notion of idealism and reality of conduct. The narrator portrays Billy Budd as an innocent and attractive man, who later involves in the Great Mutiny with Surgeon Claggart, an unattractive and impressed man. Then the narrator praises how Captain Vere, with his mighty and heroic naval experiences, effortlessly controls the situation and ends the mutiny to restore order on the ship.

Although the characters are portrayed in specific manners, their conducts indicate otherwise. Such incongruity demonstrates an ambiguous perspective of the characters. The readers should perceive the characters by deconstructing and examining their actions, rather than assuming the characters' nature through the proposed perception. Throughout the novella, the narrator's language demonstrates an ambiguity in the discrepancy between the notion of idealism and reality of actions.

The narrator's description of Billy Budd demonstrates an ambiguous perspective of the character. From the beginning of the story, Billy Budd is introduced as an attractive, strong, and affable sailor. From these traits, the narrator depicts Billy Budd in an innocent manner, as someone who is incapable of malevolence and inexperienced in the outside world. Consequently, Billy is viewed as an innocent person because of his portrayal. When the Red Whiskers give Billy a dig, "quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm. I dare say he never meant to do quite as

much as he did, but anyhow he gave the burly fool a terrible drubbing” (Melville, Ch. 1). As someone who is perceived as inexperienced or incapable of malevolence, Billy Budd should respond with hesitance. However, his “quick as lightning” response implies a trained reaction. Moreover, the “terrible drubbing” suggests that there is much more than a single strike, of which cannot constitute a beating. Billy Budd’s reaction contradicts his portrayal and demonstrates an alternative perspective of his character. Initially, the narrative constructs Billy in the image of innocence and purity, similar to Adam before his fall, who is unacquainted with evil. Contrasting the implemented idea, it is improbable that Billy is unaware of his own strength before striking the Red Whiskers. Noting the inconsistency in language from the narrator, Evan R. Davis makes an interesting observation in “An Allegory of America in Melville's ‘Billy Budd’.” Davis explains that, “the incongruity between character and environment cannot be reconciled” (Davis 177). The incongruity refers to the discrepancy between an idealistic Billy Budd and his actions in certain situations. In order to defend himself from the Red Whiskers, and even to throw such a beating, Billy must have had previous experiences in a similar situation. The environment could have shaped Billy’s response in a way that it becomes his immediate reaction to the situation. The incongruity in language displays an alternative perspective of the character. Furthermore, the ambiguity continues as the narrator contradicts himself by saying “the avowal of such an imperfection in the Handsome Sailor should be evidence not alone that he is not presented as a conventional hero” (Melville, Ch. 2). From the beginning of the story, the narrator portrays Billy Budd as someone who is seemingly flawless. However, after recognizing Billy’s “imperfection”, the narrator adjusts his context by saying Billy Budd is “not presented as a conventional hero”, implying that Billy is flawed. More importantly, the narrator continues to refer to Billy Budd as the “Handsome Sailor”, as if it is his most significant trait. Ironically, the narrator does not

recognize Billy for his competency or propriety, but rather his attractiveness. Accordingly, Billy Budd is portrayed as similar to Apollo, a Greek God who brought the enlightenment of good and evil to the human race. In this notion, Billy is certainly aware of the presence of evil around him, which contradicts the initial proposal of his innocence. Since the narrator fails to cohere his descriptions of Billy Budd, John H. Timmerman criticizes the incongruent elements in “Typology and Biblical Consistency in ‘Billy Budd’.” Timmerman states that, “the danger of typological analysis lies in a perversion of the primary narrative” (Timmerman 28). Contrasting the previous depiction of Billy Budd, the narrator perverts from the initial proposed perspective and shifts to a contrasting idea, without presenting sufficient evidence to substantiate his claims. Originally from the narrative, Billy Budd bears a considerable resemblance to Adam before his fall, yet in later story developments, there is a striking similitude between Billy and Apollo. By demonstrating inconsistency in language, the narrator confuses the reader by constructing Billy’s image as both Adam and Apollo, who share conflicting attributes. From the many inconsistencies in the narrative, a true understanding of the character is hard to reconstruct. Although Billy is perceptibly flawless, he showcases an alternative impression and should be viewed in a skeptical manner.

The narrator prevaricates about Claggart’s tendencies by depicting him in a villainous manner. Although Claggart is portrayed as not attractive or strong like Billy, he demonstrates utter obedience and competence to enforce social ideals into others. The narrator explains Claggart as someone who has “superior capacity, [...] constitutional sobriety, ingratiating deference to superiors; [...] all this capped by a certain austere patriotism abruptly advanced him to the position of Master-at-arms” (Melville, Ch. 8). With “superior capacity”, “constitutional sobriety”, and “austere patriotism”, Claggart demonstrates competence, dignity and patriotism.

His driven and cunning nature “abruptly advance[s] him to the position of Master-at-arms” and makes him an ideal enforcer for the benefit of Captain Vere. Nonetheless, the narrator perceives a man by his appearances, rather than his actions. In “The Impressments of Billy Budd”, Jeff Westover criticizes the narrator for using the language as a mechanism to manipulate the audience. Westover states that, “the narrator evokes such penal dimensions of impressment when he ambiguously hints at Claggart's shady past” (Westover 365). Most of the men on the ship are impressed because they were in poverty and were not nobilities; this applies to both Billy Budd and Claggart. However, only Claggart is deemed of having a “shady past” because of his less attractive appearance. From listing Claggart’s qualities as an honorable Surgeon in chapter 8, the narrator immediately denotes Claggart and refers to him as a villain due to his appeals in chapter 11. With the incoherent flow, the narrator fails to provide adequate evidence to substantiate his allegation of Claggart as the villain of the story, aside from stating how unattractive Claggart is. In chapter 19, after Billy’s untruthful accusation, Claggart gets punched in the forehead and immediately dies from the attack. Upon Claggart’s death, the narrator compares his corpse to a serpent, as “the twain raised the felled one from the loins up into a sitting position. The spare form flexibly acquiesced, but inertly. It was like handling a dead snake” (Melville, Ch. 19). Claggart’s corpse is handled like a “dead snake” because he is considered evil by the narrator. A serpent is an illusion of evil in Christian ideology; however, this should not be a viable assessment of Claggart’s propensities, considering various ideologies are introduced within the narrative, including the Greek mythology, in which a serpent represents wisdom. By prevaricating about Claggart’s tendencies, the narrator fails to provide any evidence to validate his claim and successfully condemns Claggart in an implausible manner. Jeff Westover continues to discuss the ambiguity in the notion of impressment. He states that, “impressment-as-

impression is a process whereby external forces of subjection produce corresponding psychological forces on the part of the subjected individual” (Westover 362-363). The “impressment-as-impression” ridicules the narrator’s denotation of Claggart’s impressment. Most sailors on the ship are impressed, and if they are to be judged in this specific perspective, all of them must share the common traits: being poor and impressed. Claggart is denoted by the narrator because of his appearances, whereas Billy Budd is not. The author seems unarguably biased of Billy and displays implausible prejudice towards Claggart.

The narrator portrays Captain Vere as a respectable naval figure, which contrasts his approach towards Billy’s trial. Vere represents the order in an authoritarian government. He demands utter obedience and adherence to the law. After Billy’s severe accusation, Vere inquires Billy to defend himself and provide a thorough explanation. However, “though at the time Captain Vere was quite ignorant of Billy’s liability to vocal impediment, he now immediately divined it” (Melville, Ch. 19). Billy’s “vocal impediment” is well-known among the crew, yet, Captain Vere selectively chooses to acknowledge the inhibition. Although Vere was previously “ignorant” of it, during the questioning, he “immediately divine[s] it”, knowing that Billy will ultimately fail to defend himself, hence giving Vere more authority and justification in determining Billy’s faith. Through the narrator’s language, Billy Budd’s vocal impediment exemplifies the helplessness in the weak majority, whereas Vere exemplifies the necessary supremacy to compose order on the ship. Initially, Vere is introduced as a respectable naval figure, who has experiences and understands the necessities of his sailors. However, through Billy’s accusation, Vere seemingly displays injustice when he determines Billy’s faith, knowing that Billy does not hold the ability to fight back. According to the narrative, Captain Vere ignores and acknowledges Billy’s impediment to his favor. Although Vere is portrayed as a hero, he

could be perceived as the opposite. In “ ‘Speak, Man!’: ‘Billy Budd’ in the Crucible of Reconstruction”, Michael Gilmore perceives Captain Vere in an alternative perspective. He states that, “what really sets the villain apart is his readiness to violate the code of verbal restraint necessitated by England's danger, a code he himself has responsibility for enforcing, and to traffic in inflammatory words that must result in death” (Gilmore 503). During Billy’s questioning, the situation becomes favorable to Vere, because he has jurisdiction over it. Vere is the judge in the trial, in which he is also the witness. According to the narrator, Vere is seemingly biased against Billy. This situation demonstrates chaos in Captain Vere and further showcases the incongruity in the story, as the seemingly respectable captain discriminates against the incapable. Such inconsistency continues when Vere determines Billy’s faith. When Claggart is “struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” (Melville, Ch. 19). Although Captain Vere refers to Billy Budd as “an angel of God”, the captain has already decided that “the angel must hang”. The contradictory between these two phrases displays the ambiguity in the language. Since Billy Budd was deemed with imperfection, he should not be compared to “an angel”, who is God’s flawless creation. Moreover, Captain Vere fails to properly address the mutiny. Consequently, Billy Budd’s death appears unjustified. In “Melville’s Motley Crew: History and Constituent Power in *Billy Budd*,” David Drysdale criticizes Captain Vere’s approach towards the trial. He states that, “Vere adopts the role of the sovereign insofar as he invokes his power to determine the state of exception. Acting as both witness and judge, Vere marshals a series of emergency powers that he exercises in the name of stability” (Drysdale 326). By acting as both witness and judge, Vere rushes the trial and promptly indicts Billy for his crime. Captain Vere fails to establish a justified trial, considering he is the witness and could display prejudice against the culprit or the victim of crime. On the

other hand, he initially exemplifies the necessary power to constitute order. By quickly ending the mutiny, Vere also restores order and peace on the ship. Since the beginning of the story, order has the connotations of discipline and repression. To ensure an everlasting peace onboard, Billy's death is utilized to enforce the social ideals. Although Billy's death could be perceived as unjustified, Vere's action could also be recognized as a necessary evil. The narrator's language displays many inconsistencies, which fails to translate the captain's true tendencies and create an obscure image of him.

By demonstrating ambiguity, the narrator utilizes binary opposition to signify the discrepancy between the notion of good and evil, free and oppressed. The binary opposition between good and evil are apparent throughout the novella, as Billy and Claggart possess opposite characteristics. After Billy's accusation of Claggart starting a mutiny, many sailors immediately believe the accusation and condemn their respectable surgeon. The narrator questions, "what indeed could the trouble have to do with one so little inclined to give offence as the merchant-ship's peacemaker, even him who in Claggart's own phrase was 'the sweet and pleasant young fellow'?" (Melville, Ch. 11). With an affable personality, Billy Budd becomes the "merchant-ship's peacemaker" and according to the narrator, even Claggart views Billy as "the sweet and pleasant young fellow". Correspondingly, many chaplains are convinced by Billy's claim and fail to distinguish the perceived assumption from the course of actions. Billy is recognized as "good" in the mutiny because of his appearance, whereas Claggart is perceived as "evil" in the same notion. The connotations of these words signify social powers, where the "good" has immense power and the "evil" has marginalized power. From the beginning of the story, since Billy has perceptibly "good" characteristics, his words are powerful than Claggart's. The discrepancy in perception demonstrates the ambiguous language; although the sailors

recognize and respect Claggart's competency, they immediately denounce their Surgeon through an unproven accusation. Noting the incongruity, David Drysdale criticizes the sailors for being so gullible. He states that "the novella compels the reader to engage in reading as an active practice that involves the weighing of evidence, the consideration of mitigating circumstances" (Drysdale 334). By failing to consider the evidence, the sailors appear impulsive in this situation. The implied perception should not be the primary source of evaluation. All characters should be observed and considered from an equally skeptical perspective. If Claggart is portrayed as attractive like Billy Budd, Billy's character could be considered as "evil" since his action of murdering a surgeon will be condemned by the society. The narrator utilizes language as a mechanism to manipulate the audience's perception. The language also discusses the discrepancy between the notion of free and oppressed, "while other members of that aristocracy to which by birth he belonged were incensed at the innovators mainly because their theories were inimical to the privileged classes" (Melville, Ch. 7). Only Captain Vere belongs in the "privileged classes" because he is a member of that "aristocracy". He chooses to become a captain out of his free will. He has the power since birth and continues to possess that power throughout his life. In this notion, society gives power to the superiors and diminishes the power in the majority. All the sailors unquestionably obey him, as he is the superior. Although he is viewed as a respectable captain, he seemingly displays injustice when he determines Billy's faith. According to John Timmerman, "he is the moral absolute by which others aboard ship judge their own moral stature" (Timmerman 33). In the notion of free and oppressed, Captain Vere has the choice to shape what is considered right or wrong, while the sailors do not, because they have marginalized power. Through the narrator's language, Billy perceptibly dies as a martyr, as the sailors chant about his honorable death. He dies believing of an emerging mutiny, however, in

reality, he could be the one that starts the mutiny. The incongruity in the narrative creates difficulties to fully understand the situation.

Through the narrator's language, Billy Budd's death exemplifies the disparity of social perception and demonstrates the equity of men's demises. After Billy's faith is determined, Billy has his final moments to reflect the surroundings. Before he is hanged, the sailors recall that "his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance were these — 'God bless Captain Vere!' " (Melville, Ch. 25). By saying "God bless Captain Vere", Billy appears to be forgiving as he could have begrudged Captain Vere, the man who sentenced him to death. Through this dialogue, the narrator idealizes and even compares Billy to Jesus; however, Billy could never be considered equivalent to Jesus because of his sins. Accordingly, although Billy seemingly has a transcended experience, he could never ascend to heaven because he has sinned. In contrast, Billy Budd has an extremely realistic death where he suffers from agony and isolation. In the same ambiguous perspective, Michael Gilmore criticizes the incongruity in character development. Gilmore states that, "Captain Vere's moral position in the narrative, which turns on his speech to the drumhead court, reveals itself most sharply, and most ambiguously" (Gilmore 493). Vere's moral position in the narrative seemingly contradicts his portrayal, as he was introduced as a heroic and respectable captain. Similar to Billy Budd, the narrator's incongruent language does not completely translate the characters' true nature. Although some sailors chant about Billy's unjustified death, they do not physically oppose Captain Vere, which displays their hypocritical and incongruous personalities. After Billy's death, the sailors consider Captain Vere's decision as unjustified as they "felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilfull murder. They recalled the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor, that face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within"

(Melville, Ch. 30). Billy Budd is perceived as “incapable of mutiny” because of his innocent and angelic appearance. Although Billy punched and murdered Claggart, he is “never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak” because of his perceived purity and innocence. Although Billy is portrayed as an innocent and incapable man, all characters should be perceived in an equal capacity, not how the language perceives them to be. Billy Budd and Surgeon Claggart are portrayed in opposite manners, yet, they all share the same faith at the end. Moreover, the narrator recalls that Billy’s death contributes to the greater good, of reinforcing Captain Vere’s authority and regulating the social ideals. Evan Davis explains that, “Billy’s execution is accepted by the other sailors and produces the desired result of maintaining order and discipline since no mutiny occurs” (Davis 173). None of the sailors physically opposes Captain Vere’s decision of hanging Billy because they are conditioned to obey the captain’s order. Since Vere successfully ends the mutiny, peace and discipline are restored once again on the ship. Although the sailors seemingly favor Billy, they do not question their captain and contradict the narrative.

The narrator repeatedly demonstrates ambiguity throughout the novella. Initially, the narrator portrays Billy Budd in an innocent and incapable manner, which contradicts his experienced reaction to the Red Whiskers. The narrator then prevaricates about Claggart’s tendencies, which inaccurately portrays him as the villain. However, the true villain of the story could be Captain Vere, who was initially portrayed as a respectable figure, yet abuses his power and reinforces his authority by condemning the powerless. Nonetheless, Vere’s approach towards the mutiny could also be perceived as a necessary evil. Between one’s idealistic portrayal and reality of conduct, there are too many inconsistencies to fully understand the characters. Language is a powerful mechanism to manipulate the perception of something. Accordingly, the story should be perceived from a skeptical perspective.

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