

# Herman melvilles billy budd sailor argumentative essay

[Law](#), [Capital Punishment](#)



On reading Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd* it becomes obvious that the story's implications reach greatly beyond that of a simple tale of a mutiny and hanging at sea. The story is provocatively double layered, heavy in its symbolism and meaning, in which the author's interest rests, among other things, on a clash of conscience and law, on a never ending war between the individual and the society, the vulnerability of innocence and the final question of whether the readers are to condemn captain Vere for his decision or to respect him. This idea is closely intertwined with the question of capital punishment and how just, effective and moral it really is.

Melville's name had joined the canon of great American authors in the early 20th century and his novel has, since then, become the epitome of a capital hanging in nineteenth century American literature (Jones 160). A rational thinking mind always has doubts as to which crimes are considered capital and thus, punished in this most severe manner possible, and whether such a punishment would serve as a deterrent factor to those participating in the public spectacles of execution. Billy Budd himself witnesses the sight of a sailor being savagely whipped for failing to turn up at his assigned post, and bows never to disregard his tasks and turns to them with an even greater diligence than before. This is where Melville portrays the mystical vision of events to come, foreshadowing the tragedy that would befall "the sweet and pleasant fellow", who so far, has never encountered evil in any form and who has always naively believed that other people mean him only well (Melville 10). He is the epitome of a "handsome sailor," reminding us of their infamous reputation on land: drunkards, fighters, lovers, though Billy himself does not possess these traits (Melville 107). He represents Melville's "

unfathomable ambiguity of human nature and motivation” (Rollyson, Paddock and Gentry 39), because later his peaceful countenance becomes adorned with the ability of not only lying, but of inflicting serious physical harm, something which will prove to bear tragic consequences. Nonetheless, these signs of a soul not so pure are disregarded as being an unquestionable part of himself as much as his beauty and unspoiled nature are.

Though several chapters digress slightly from the story of Billy Budd with the story of mutinies in the British navy, they are relevant to the author’s establishing of context. In the era of the American, French and Haitian revolution, there existed an anxiety concerning the potential uprising of the masses. As it turns out later, this is exactly the case on H. M. S. Indomitable, because the question of mutiny is ubiquitous, as Billy Budd is approached by a stranger and asked to be a part of it. Rollyson, Paddock and Gentry argue that this fear “ bears heavily on Vere’s understanding of his duties and responsibilities” (41). In other words, the question of whether or not Billy Budd really deserves the death penalty is overshadowed by this fear of mutiny and preserving the established order aboard the vessel. At sea, people aboard a ship function like a miniature society where everyone is put to his rightful place, where the good are rewarded and the bad punished. Thus, in order to conserve and protect this pre-established order, captain Vere was forced to punish Billy Budd’s impudence of striking a superior officer in addition to being accused of abetting a mutiny, and putt any kind of personal sympathy and affection he might feel aside. Readers who defend Vere’s decision, might suggest that “ Billy’s failure to report the potential mutiny or to identify the conspirators... implicates him in mutiny and

therefore justifies his death” (Rollyson, 41).

H. Bruce Franklin quotes Judge Richard A. Posner who “ condemns those who “ condemn Vere’s conduct” as mere “ liberals” who are “ uncomfortable with authority... and hate capital punishment”” (337). Having been written in the late 19th century, during the “ climax of a century-long battle over capital punishment” it is clear that story itself derives, in part, from this struggle (Franklin 338). Numerous articles surfaced condemning this practice or glorifying it, such as it was the case with judge Posner. The omnipresent differentiation of black people committing crimes and white people committing those exact same crimes resulted in different outcomes and different understanding of what a capital crime is. The gruesome idea of a public execution or hanging was regarded as a potent disincentive for other potential criminals. Furthermore, civilian courts differ from military courts, where they follow strict procedures and are utterly indifferent to the rights of man, where military justice prevails over moral justice. In an interesting word play, Melville names Billy Budd’s previous ship Rights-of-Man as if to emphasize Budd’s involuntary transference from a place of understanding, loyalty to brother man and respect of human rights, saying “ Good-bye to you, too, old Rights-of-Man,” into the world where society overpowers the individual with authority, where the rights of an individual do not matter (Melville 14). The Indomitable stands as a symbol of society and authority in stark contrast to the Rights-of-Man, which lives up to its name.

Melville’s cunning use of the narrator makes his intention of leaving the moral answer to captain Vere’s action open, because his unreliable narrator’s presentation of the story only heightens its ambiguity. As one of

the “major writers of the antebellum period” Melville “is not taking an explicit personal stand on one side or another” (Jones 161). Though, he does provide the wrongly accused Billy Budd with a peaceful death, something that is not pertained to a death by the gallows, as if trying to convey the idea that Billy Budd is about to die with a clear conscience, like “an angel of God” (Melville 121). Later, after his unjust death, Billy Budd’s story lives on through his shipmates, the yardarm from which he was hanged becomes a saintly object for the other sailors and even captain Vere himself dies with Billy Budd’s name on his lips.

Subtle indications of Billy Budd’s innocence are ubiquitous, but it is not his life Melville was trying to portray. It was his death, and the death of a thousand other souls, rightly or wrongly accused of a crime and sentenced to death. Only through martyrdom-like death of his protagonist was he able to tell his readers that killing is never the answer.

## References:

Franklin, H. Bruce. “Billy Budd and Capital Punishment: A Tale of Three Centuries.” *American Literature*, 69. 2 (1997): 337 – 359. Web. 10 August. 2011.

Jones, P. Christian. *Against the Gallows: Antebellum American Writers and the Movement to Abolish Capital Punishment*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1969. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Billy Budd*. Web. 10 August. 2011.

Rollyson, Carl Edmund, et al. Critical Companion to Herman Melville: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. Print.