

Literary analysis of odd wording in billy budd by herman melville

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



“ What’s in a Name: Melville’s Odd Wording in Billy Budd”

The odd, one might say “ queer,” language of the novella Billy Budd makes it difficult to not read Melville’s words in a sexualized way. In the beginning of chapter 11, the author uses wording that does not even appear to be normal in the maritime, late 18th century context of which it is placed. Being “ down” on someone, as well as odd nicknames such as “ Jemmy Legs” are simply out of place in the text when referring to its period. There are a few hints to suggest that this sort of verbiage is meant to invoke some specific feelings toward and ideas about the characters. For instance, referring to Claggart as “ Jemmy Legs,” gives the reader a sense of how Claggart is looked down upon by his subordinates because it suggests that the Master-at-arms has restless legs, that he is jittery and nervous, and that he has no control over any of his motions in his legs, implying that if he has no control over his legs, then what control could he possibly have over a crew of men? Being “ down” on someone refers to an anti-preferential treatment, an oppressive view of someone, but, upon further inspection, especially when combined with other language in the novella like Billy Budd’s nickname, Baby Budd, it gets washed in a language that is rather erotic in nature, but not in a truly outward sense.

An additional point on naming is the different way that Claggart refers to Billy. The man despises him, and, yet, to the other sailors, he refers to Billy as “ the sweet and pleasant young fellow” (Chapter 11). His motives for doing this are not fully clear, but it is possible that Claggart refers to Billy this way because the Master-at-arms does not want his reputation to be ruined.

He must hide his true disdain for the Handsome Sailor because his reputation, what little of it he has, his potential plan, and his position are all at stake. This is the “harmlessness” to which Melville refers. Claggart is acting out of fear. Although Billy is harmless and not shown any interest in taking the Master-at-arms position, Claggart’s insecurity gets the best of him and the “harmlessness” causes the disdain, which, ultimately, leads to violence.

The author also uses language that he does not commonly unpack, such as calling the relationship between Billy and Claggart a “romantic incident” (Chapter 11), or when he referred to the daily “contact” (Chapter 11), that every sailor has with his shipmates. This contact is not clearly defined, and, considering that there are many forms of contact in the world, it is not clear what Melville is implying here. Does he mean spoken contact, eye contact, physical contact, or any other forms? There is an ambiguity that allows for several different readings of this specific passage. If Melville means eye contact, it shows how the ship is full of living people. One would hope that on a battleship, a sailor would make eye contact and see his peers on a regular basis, otherwise it would suggest a skeleton crew. What is interesting about this thought, though, is that, despite the crowdedness of the ship, the readers only truly get interaction with a really small amount of characters and the rest are lumped up into one sort of audience, similar to that of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. If the author is meaning to suggest physical contact, it is likely supposed to give the reader a few goosebumps thinking about the cramped conditions of the ship. Melville, through the enlisting

lieutenant, gives the readers an idea of the ship's large populace when he tells Billy "you can't take that big box aboard a warship...bag and hammock for the man-of-war's man" (Chapter 1). Billy is unable to bring the large box that he had on the Rights of Man onto the Bellipotent, and, so, along with his dignity, he must also rid himself of possessions, which he freely does without complaint. The character is romantic in the classic sense of the word, implying a sort of adventurous spirit.

Additionally, the idea of that crowded ship, the "contact" being "among all ranks," is questionable. The novella does describe Vere, after all, as having an unobtrusive demeanor (Chapter 6). How can one be unobtrusive and, yet, make contact with the hordes of sailors on the ship at the same time?

Continuing, considering that Vere is usually elevated above the rest of the sailors with his mind out somewhere on the horizon, this would suggest that he actually does not make much contact, even daily, with his subordinates because his mind is not truly present until it absolutely needs to be. Vere only truly makes contact whenever people stand in a specific spot to catch his eye and address him in a specific way. The fact that Melville chose to state this as "all ranks," but chooses to have Captain Vere disregard his crew most of the time is a contradiction that cannot be overlooked. This suggests that Vere either is not a sailor, as his description would suggest people would see him, or he simply is such a high rank that this statement does not apply to him.

On the note of different uses of the word romance, when Melville draws a parallel between the gothic romance *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the

relationship in Billy Budd between Claggart and Billy, he is, first, likely foreshadowing the grim fate of the pair of sailors. Secondly, Melville is making a subtle reference to their respective potentials to be of nobility and to Claggart as Emily, the story's ill protagonist, and Billy as Valancourt, the novel's handsome, naturally-in-tune-with-nature support character.

Presumably, Emily's illness is comparable to Claggart's envy and, because of that, loathing for Billy. The endless mountains of the Pyrenees and the Apennines are comparable to that of the waves of the Mediterranean and, the waves of emotion and tension between the two characters, especially in Vere's cabin when Billy strikes Claggart down.

This passage says much on the relationship between Claggart and Billy. It continues the conversation and description of Vere. It, like much of the rest of the book, references other works of literature, rather than actually giving the characters a dynamic disposition, to demonstrate depth. To other eyes, there will be even more suggested and implied in the story.