

## Exploring Homoeroticism in Herman Melville's Novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*

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During the nineteenth century, orthodox sexual norms and sexual roles provided both men and women with society's behavioral expectations. In his 1835 work *Democracy in America*, the French political analyst and historian Alexis de Tocqueville defines the nineteenth century's expectations of a man: he has "the one goal of making his fortune," and although he is expected to marry, "it is doubtful if in his wife and children he sees anything else than a detached portion of himself" (Baker-Benfield 5). Marriage to a woman does, though, provide a man with a sense of stability that he would otherwise lack, and "[men] attach great importance to procuring for themselves that sort of deep, regular, and quiet affection which constitutes the charm and safeguard of life" (Baker-Benfield 45). The nineteenth century American man's defining characteristics—his monetary status and his stability gained through marriage—are also his obligations to society at large. Since a man's societal expectations revolve around the presumption of heterosexuality, homosexuality in men was unsurprisingly taboo; common consensus charged that "[male] homosexuals should be hanged, flogged, castrated, and sent home" (Robb 13). In order to avoid social ostracism or legal punishment, many nineteenth century gay or gay-curious writers included homosexual sub-themes in their works as a means of sexual expression (Robb 206). One such writer, Herman Melville, explores homosexuality in his short stories and, most notably, in his novella, *Billy Budd*. Although *Billy Budd* was not published until 1924, the novella is considered to be one of "only about fifty works of western literature in the nineteenth century [that] can be said to treat the subject of male homosexuality more or less openly" (Robb 199). Melville incorporates the sub-theme of homoeroticism into the main theme of good versus evil in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, by personifying male homosexuality in the complex relationship between two seamen, Billy Budd and Claggart.

In the novella, Billy Budd symbolizes good; his most striking characteristic is his preserved and somewhat disturbing innocence. Although Billy has "aged [to be] twenty-one" (Melville 293), the narrator describes Billy as being childishly pure:

He was young; and despite his all but fully developed frame, in aspect looked even younger than he really was, owing to a lingering adolescent expression in the as yet smooth face all but feminine in purity of natural complexion but where, thanks to his seagoing, the lily was quite suppressed and the rose had some ado visibly to flush through the tan. (Melville 229)

Billy possesses innocence not only in appearance, but in practice as well; he has never confronted evil head on, "much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company," and remains, for all intents and purposes, sexually pure (Melville 301).

Nowhere is Billy's sexual innocence more apparent than in his inability to decipher Claggart's homoerotic intentions. For example, Billy accidentally spills his soup on the newly cleaned floor, where he meets Claggart, who happens to be passing:

Claggart, the master-at-arms, official rattan in hand, happened to be passing along...Stepping over [the soup], he was proceeding on his way without comment, since the matter was nothing to take notice of under the circumstances, when he happened to observe who it was that had done the spilling...Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan,

saying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times, 'Handsomely done, my lad!  
And handsome is as handsome did it, too!' (Melville 322)

Billy, simply thinking that Claggart is complimenting him, remains unaware of Claggart's overt sexual advances. Claggart concerns himself with the soup incident, which "was nothing to take notice of under the circumstances," simply because of Billy's involvement (Melville 322). Being the master-at-arms onboard the ship, which is equivalent to the chief of police, Claggart could reprimand Billy by "[ejaculating] something hasty at the sailor," but he does not (Melville 322). Instead, Claggart, driven by a homosexual attraction to Billy, disregards naval protocol; he intervenes in an incident that is outside his jurisdiction, ignores his duty to punish Billy after he does intervene, and, most strikingly, abandons his superior position altogether by tapping Billy playfully on the bottom with his rattan. Unable to control his homoerotic desires, Claggart's actions with his rattan suggest sodomy. Also, while talking to Billy, Claggart's voice assumes a melodic tone "peculiar to him at times," suggesting that Claggart, speaking gently and informally, tries to woo Billy (Melville 322). Finally, Claggart admits his attraction to Billy by calling him handsome. Despite Claggart's explicit homosexual advances, Billy's sexual purity obstructs his knowledge of Claggart's homoerotic behavior.

The stringent, societal-imposed sexual norms of the nineteenth century gave way to more anarchic sexual practices onboard ships. Echoing this trend, Melville himself states that, "A ship is a bit of terra firma cut off from the main; it is a state in itself; and the captain is its king" (Graham). Since ships are largely autonomous from society's standards, ocean-going vessels allow for submersion, the idea that "in certain periods and places, fashions in clothing and behavior allow certain forms of homosexual expression to pass unnoticed. They are as it were submerged into wider culture" (Robb 110). In the mid-nineteenth century, sailors contended that the rules of sodomy on land differ from those at sea: "Buggery was fine on board ship, but...on land, buggers should be shot" (Robb 110).

In *Billy Budd*, Claggart constantly finds himself torn between the sexual restrictions that society places on men and the sexual permissiveness that the sea allows. For instance, Melville characterizes Claggart as possessing both redeeming and damning qualities:

Claggart was a man about five-and-thirty, somewhat spare and tall, yet of no ill figure upon the whole...The face was a notable one, the features all except the chin cleanly cut as those on a Greek medallion...His brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect...With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it. (313-28)

Although Melville states that Claggart's evil qualities are inherent and will inevitably override the good that resides within him, one must recognize that Claggart does have good qualities. Most notably, Claggart is handsome and intelligent, and one may wonder why a man who possesses such positive characteristics remains unmarried. In addition to making Claggart the embodiment of evil in the novella, Claggart's inborn wickedness may perhaps explain why, according to Tocqueville, Claggart has not fulfilled his heterosexual role as a man. Unmarried, Claggart lacks the stability that a wife brings to a man's life. Also, Claggart's bachelor status makes him particularly susceptible to the anarchic sexual practices aboard ships, where men lived in close contact with other men and encountered women infrequently. Claggart's inability to fully accept the

validity of submersion, though, creates an internal battle within him, with landlocked sexual norms on one side and seafaring sexual ambiguity on the other.

Claggart's sexual dilemma manifests itself through his interactions with Billy Budd:

When Claggart's unobserved glance happened to light on belted Billy... that glance would follow the cheerful sea Hypersion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban. But this was evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shriveling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut. (Melville 338)

Unobserved and thus left to indulge in his own private desires, Claggart, while viewing Billy, is torn between his maritime sexual yearnings and his heterosexual societal obligations. The sight of Billy evokes within Claggart unsurpassed sorrow; his expression becomes "melancholy," and his eyes fill with "feverish tears" (Melville 338). Claggart's emotional response to Billy expresses the internal battle—the heterosexuality expected by the outside world versus the homosexuality tolerated on ships—brewing within Claggart. Claggart seems to lament his sexual predicament, for the narrator notes that Claggart yearns for Billy, and "could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (Melville 338). With great difficulty, Claggart reins in his physical display of emotion; Claggart's face twists and contorts until it resembles a "wrinkled walnut" (Melville 338). Claggart's fear of society's reaction to homoerotic relations creates within him a dichotomist state, pinning his true desires, homosexuality, against his societal expectations, heterosexuality.

As Claggart struggles to come to terms with his homoerotic feelings, his passion for Billy further fuels Claggart's sexual orientation crisis, which is burning within him:

One person excepted, the master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd. And the insight but intensified his passion, which assuming various secret forms within him, at times assumed that of cynic disdain, disdain of innocence—to be nothing more than innocent! Yet in an aesthetic way he saw the charm of it, the courageous free-and-easy temper of it, and fain would have shared it, but he despaired of it. (Melville 327-28)

Claggart feels a close connection to Billy. The narrator notes that Claggart alone fully comprehends Billy's unique moral purity. Claggart's deep insight into Billy's character "intensified [Claggart's] passion" for Billy; Claggart is not only physically attracted to Billy, but feels spiritually connected to him as well (Melville 328). This passion for Billy "[assumed] various secret forms within [Claggart]," implying that Claggart's true feelings for Billy, which range from sexual desire to deep love, are a "secret" that Claggart feels he must keep from society at large (Melville 328). Claggart views Billy's sexual innocence with "cynic disdain," tortured by the reality of the situation: even if Claggart overcomes society's sexual restraints and accepts submersion, the sexually naive Billy would be incapable of returning Claggart's homoerotic sentiments (Melville 328). Claggart loathes the innocence in Billy, which condemns Claggart's passion to inapplicability. On the other hand, Billy's innocence aesthetically pleases Claggart, who, were it not for his inherent evil, would gladly embrace purity. If, like Billy, Claggart oozed sexual innocence, he would have no knowledge of homoerotic desire; he could easily conform to society's heterosexual norms and would arguably bring an end to his internal sexual agony.

In *Billy Budd*, Melville interweaves the theme of male homosexuality into the novella's plot of good versus evil. Billy, the embodiment of good, remains ignorant of Claggart's sexual

advances. Claggart, the personification of evil, cannot achieve Billy's level of purity and thus can neither fulfill his heterosexual societal roles nor resolve his sexual orientation crisis. By exploring the prevalent homoeroticism in *Billy Budd*, one can gain a better understanding of nineteenth century societal pressures on men and the turmoil that yearning for freedom from those societal restraints may have caused.

#### Works Cited

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