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Nirvani V. Anoop Ms.  
*CUNY Hunter College*

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**The Nature of Government and Civic Responsibility in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*,**

*Sailor*

by

Nirvani Anoop

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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KELVIN BLACK

Thesis Sponsor – Kelvin Black

1/20/2020

Date

JEREMY GLICK

Second Reader – Jeremy Glick

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## Introduction

*Billy Budd, Sailor* is a novella that renders unstable those beliefs—social, political, and moral—that define us as individuals and as citizens within a society. It evokes the questions: how should one govern and how should one *be* governed? The narrative, Herman Melville’s final work, was completed in 1891 though not published until 1924. It is set a century earlier from its date of production, that is, in 1797, twenty years after the American Revolution and during the French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799. The story occurs at a time when Britain was at war with France and just months after the Spithead and Nore mutinies that threatened to destabilize the British Royal Navy in April and May respectively of that same year. British sailors mutinied to protest the injustices and unfair treatment they experienced in the Navy, such as being supplied with “shoddy cloth, rations, not sound, or false in the measure” (*BB* 443), insufficient wages, unsanitary and dangerous work conditions.<sup>1</sup> Referring to these events, the narrator asserts that, “Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion” (*BB* 440). Thus, the incidents in the tale unfold during a time of general upheaval: social, political, and cultural; it was a time in which questions and concerns regarding the government of nations, and of men, arose. While there have been extensive analyses of Melville’s authorial intention in writing the novella, his conservatism or progressivism as reflected in the tale, and of the story’s exploration of natural and social justice, my thesis will focus on how the story raises specific and destabilizing questions about the nature and purpose of government and its relation to the law, society’s conception of morality and civic responsibility, and individual rights. I believe that the text engenders doubt in its readership,

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<sup>1</sup>For further reading on the practices of the Royal Navy, see: Jamieson, A.G. “Tyranny of the Lash? Punishment in the Royal Navy during the American War, 1776-1783.” *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, IX, No. 1 (January 1999), 53-66.

particularly in its depiction both of the circumstances surrounding Billy Budd's trial on the warship, *Bellipotent*, and of the ship's Captain, Edward Vere's, rationale for his decision to hang Billy. The doubts in question are threefold: doubts about the integrity of the legal and political systems in place, doubts about the logic of the law (which reflects the state's logic) and the justness of legal practices supported by those in power, as well as doubts about the institutions and representatives that uphold that power. These doubts are meant to provoke questions, not only about the justness of the governing systems themselves, but also about their effects on the modes of thought and behavior of the individuals – both the governed and the governors – within them.

My analysis of the text will utilize French theorist and literary critic, Michel Foucault's 1978 transcribed lecture titled "Governmentality" and the ideas therein to examine the power relations aboard the warship that serves as the novella's principle setting, a microcosm of society, to determine how these interact to achieve specific objectives, all tending towards the same end goal, maintaining control of the population. The events aboard the ship notably transpire during the French Revolution, when the French people revolted against the monarchy to establish their rights as citizens and individuals under an oppressive regime. The revolutionary actions of the French produce a consciousness of the fallibility of those in power and emphasize the tenuous nature of ruling institutions bereft of the consent and loyalty of their subjects. Such a consciousness in the general public is dangerous to state authority as it underscores the limitations of the powerful and the latent ability of the population to overthrow the ruling power when conditions become intolerable, as in the case of the Nore and Spithead mutinies in the novella. Consequently, both concerns with regard to national security and internal concerns of mutiny, create the need for a new manner of control over the population. When force and

adherence to the law are no longer effective means of control, new techniques and rationales must be introduced to both inspire and maintain loyalty voluntarily. The novella thus explores the existing rationale of the state in its pursuit for self-preservation, a rationale that Foucault analyzes in his lectures on governmentality, along with an implied evolving rationale during a particular moment of instability and simultaneous rising public consciousness of the rights of the individual.

This thesis will explore the various ways that Melville's text appears to indirectly critique the manner in which the state exercises its power to manipulate, through its ideologies, policies, and practices, how individuals perceive their duties as citizens and how they construct their identities under its authority. Foucault's work concerns itself with the "problematic of government" (87) and strives to arrive at a "definition of what is meant by government of the state" (88). In order to do so he traces the historical development of "a kind of rationality which was intrinsic to the art of government" (Foucault 89) and discusses how the justification for government, along with its objectives, has evolved over time in reaction to the changing needs of developing societies, societies altered by such events as revolutions, technological and scientific advances, and the rise of mercantilism, for example. Foucault believes that the "essential issue in the establishment of the art of government [is the] introduction of economy into political science" which he surmises would eventually lead to government, "exercising towards its inhabitants, and the wealth and behavior of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and goods" (92). Melville's text, situated as it is during this time of transition when political and economic concerns begin to merge to create a new rationale of government, provides an opportunity to study the beginning stages of this emerging form of governance through its depiction of the events on the *Bellipotent*.

Foucault then goes on to introduce and advocate Guillaume de La Perriere's definition of government, which states that, "government is the right disposition of things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end," elaborating further that, "The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth...customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc." (Foucault 93). He additionally notes that the metaphor of the ship is "inevitably invoked in these treatises on government" (Foucault 93). Governing thus, not only exerts its influence on a macro-level, but also concerns itself on a micro-level with the conduct, values, and ideas of individuals, in an attempt to find ways of manipulating these so that subjects willingly obey and support the objectives of the ruling power.

Keeping Foucault's assertion in mind, Melville's choice of setting for the narrative suggests a similar conception of the aptness of the ship as the vehicle for a close study of the complex relations amongst individuals within a politicized space, where a hierarchy exists in which each person has a specific duty to perform, by choice or otherwise; in other words, the ship becomes the ideal metaphor for society. Melville also chooses to historically situate the story during a period of political instability, where the old world ideals of Britain are challenged by the more progressive nations of France and the newly formed United States, both of which have rebelled under the yoke of monarchic rule in an effort to become democratic nations, where the rights of individuals become a central concern. Foucault, in "Governmentality," asserts that the eighteenth century is of particular significance because it is the period in which, "the transition...from an art of government to a political science, from a regime dominated by structures of sovereignty to one ruled by techniques of government" (101) occurs. He continues, "the problem of sovereignty was never posed with greater force than at this time" and "involved

an attempt to see what juridical and institutional form, what foundation in the law, could be given to the sovereignty that characterizes a state” (Foucault 101). Melville’s choice of the physical setting of a ship during the politically unstable eighteenth century; a period in which theories and ideas espoused by political and philosophical writers, such as Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau, to mention just a few, concerning the basis and purpose of government and the rights of its citizens, were widely circulated and dominated the political arena; strongly supports the inference that the text is meant to critically assess the multiform ways in which the state exercises its power over the individual. It does so by evaluating the methods, practices, and objectives of the state representatives, such as Captain Vere; and considers the effects of these practices upon the individuals being governed.

In applying a Foucauldian lens to *Billy Budd*, the novella can thus be seen as an analysis of the multitude of ways in which individual ideas, and consequently individual conduct, is manipulated by state reason to achieve the specific objectives of the state. It demonstrates some of the ways in which the state uses particular strategies and techniques to shape one’s patriotic impulses, moral choices, and social behavior, while also legitimizing and expanding its own authority. According to Mitchell Dean in *Foucault and Political Reason*, Foucault’s theories can be used for analyzing “the limits and possibilities of how we have come to think about who we are, what we do and the present in which we find ourselves” (210). Dean continues:

Foucault’s claim was not that personal life was necessarily political but that we need to analyze all the ways in which the *conduct of government* was linked to *the government of conduct*...He asked how we have come to problematize both our politics and our being in such a way that identity,



subjectivity and self come to be hooked to questions of politics, authority and government. (212, my emphasis)

Melville's story likewise encourages readers to consider the rationale of their moral and civic conduct and prompts the question, to what extent does the political structure affect one's ideas, not only of what is legal and moral, but also one's cultural values and customs, as well as one's notions of what constitutes socially acceptable versus socially deviant behavior. The novella induces readers to contemplate the ultimate objectives of prevailing social customs, rules, formalities, and laws, and to examine how they originate and the ways in which they collude to ensure the existing hierarchical order is maintained. Further questions that the novella evokes are: do the moral prescriptions of the socio-political structure align with one's conscience? From where do the individual's ideas on morality originate, a priori or through societal conditioning, for example, through the teachings of state-sanctioned religious and pedagogical institutions? The text also prompts the reader to consider under what authority/rationale moral and legal judgments are determined and what structural guarantees exist to uphold these judgments?

The text, thereby, in its depiction of the events on board the ship leading to the hanging of Billy Budd and the rationale of its Captain, Edward Vere, invites readers to question the moral and legal choices made within the story and judge whether these choices are sufficiently justified by Vere's proffered arguments, arguments that reflect and support the state rationale. Readers are urged by the narrative to consider the methods by which Vere, endowed with state authority, influences his subordinates' decisions and manipulates their ideas of justice. For instance, the narrator describes the doubts experienced by the three officers of the drumhead court, who "exchanged looks of troubled indecision, yet feeling that decide they must and without long delay" (*BB* 485). Using his state-sanctioned authority, Vere exerts pressure on the men, through

fear and rhetoric, to support his judgment to hang Billy without allowing them the requisite amount of time to consider or present alternative possibilities. Vere acts with what, to the officers, appears to be unnecessary haste. He attempts to convert his subordinates to his point of view because he believes that these men, whose “intelligence,” he reasons, “was mostly confined to the matter of active seamanship and the fighting demands of their profession,” as such, lack the intellectual capacity to grasp the “moral dilemma” presented by Billy’s case (*BB* 481). Such thinking reflects the paternalism associated with sovereignty, which justifies restraint of freedom of its subjects under the rationale that the state acts for the benefit of all. Vere thus justifies undermining his subordinates and taking away their ability to independently form judgments opposed to his own. These officers, along with the ship’s surgeon, and the soldier, in their reluctance to agree with Vere, enjoin readers to doubt the reasoning behind his decision; reasoning based on his potentially inaccurate assessment of the state of affairs aboard the ship as well as underestimation of his men’s intellectual capacity. Vere speculates, with no actual evidence other than the suspicion roused by master-at-arms, Claggart, during his accusation of Billy Budd as a mutineer, that the crew would react negatively, perhaps violently, if the court ameliorates or delays judgment of Billy, who they would infer acted with mutinous intent in the killing of his superior. Vere’s evaluation of the state of mind of his crew however is rendered questionable given the doubts he expresses as to Claggart’s veracity earlier in the text, where he notes that, “something in the official’s self-possessed and somewhat ostentatious manner...reminded him of a ...perjurious witness in a capital case...of which...he (Captain Vere) had been a member” (*BB* 472). Additionally, Vere has a very specific and narrow vantage point as Captain of the ship to observe and thus properly judge the attitude of the crew. His limited contact with “men of lesser grades,” and the narrator’s explanation that “it was not often that a

sailor or petty officer of those days would seek a hearing [with the captain]; only some *exceptional cause* would, *according to established custom*, have warranted that,” excites doubt about his ability to read the temperaments of the sailors with any accuracy (*BB* 470, my emphasis). Vere’s social and physical distance from the men, and his inability to relate to them, emphasized in chapter seven of the novella, makes questionable his assumptions about the sailors’ potential reactions and weakens the readers’ faith in his credibility. Vere’s relation to his subordinates, in his use of both state-sanctioned authority and rhetoric to manipulate the men to adopt his point of view, illustrates Foucault’s concept of the evolution of governing the population, where control can no longer effectively be achieved solely through brute force, but by utilizing new tactics, strategies, and ideologies that are reinforced and disseminated through associated state sanctioned institutions. Melville’s story thus can be used to examine the evolving strategies and practices of leadership and government in a transitional period in history during which the story unfolds.

In sum, the novella argues that its story is not a simple tale of a sailor hanged for the murder of a superior officer, but rather an “inside tale” as the subtitle states, riddled with complexities that both encourage the alignment of Captain Vere’s rationale for Billy’s capital punishment with the state rationale for preservation of its sovereignty, and authorize questions regarding the justice of such a rationale. Does Vere, an official representative of the state, act unjustly? By what standards should one judge if an act is just or otherwise? The story invites the reader to question the state’s legal and political institutions, not only in the text but also more generally in the Anglo-American world; it does so through raising doubts about their policies, procedures, and representatives. In addition to questions about the individual’s responsibilities to the state, readers are prompted to consider what the state’s moral and civic duties are towards its

subjects. In opposing the individual's rights against the state's precepts, the text forces readers to consider which should take precedence. I argue that ultimately the novella appears to present the following provocative choice to the reader: Are citizens to follow the dictates of state power without question or objection under the rationale of security and stability proposed by Vere? Or should they follow some set of natural instincts – a higher law - even if such instincts oppose what are deemed by the ruling power to be their civic responsibilities?

### **Vere versus Nelson: A Comparison of Leadership Styles**

*Billy Budd* encourages readers to question state reason, and consequently state authority, in various ways, one of which is in its portrayal of the high ranking representatives of the state, specifically in the form of Captain Vere, commander of the warship, *Bellipotent*. While Foucault's essay does not explicitly critique leadership styles, his discussion of Guillame de La Perriere's work, *Le Miroir Politique*(1555), one of the earliest anti-Machiavellian texts, examines La Perriere's definition of the qualities that constitute a good ruler, which has evolved from prior notions of good leadership under sovereign rule, particularly those espoused in *The Prince* (1532). According to La Perriere, "a good ruler must have patience, wisdom and diligence" (Foucault 96). Foucault elaborates further stating that, "the good governor does not have to have a sting – that is to say, a weapon of killing, a sword – in order to exercise his power; he must have patience" (Foucault 96). Wisdom, rather than being, "a knowledge of divine and human laws," becomes "the knowledge of things, of the objectives that can and should be attained," and finally diligence is defined as "the principle that a governor should only govern in such a way that he thinks and acts as though he were in the service of those who are governed," (Foucault 96). Considering this revised concept of a good ruler, we can explore Melville's

portrayal of state representatives—Graveling, Nelson, Vere—for a better understanding of what the text implies in terms of good and bad leadership in an evolving political structure.

My contention is that Captain Vere’s portrayal by the narrator calls into question many of his choices and consequent conduct as the leader of the ship and representative of state authority. As a central character in the story, Vere’s role has been analyzed and interpreted in many ways by various critics, some reading him as embodying progressive ideals, while others deeming him conservative. Specifically, his inner conflict regarding Billy renders his position sometimes ambiguous. However, the evidence in the novella supports a criticism of his actions, especially given La Perriere’s definition of a good ruler noted earlier. To begin with, it is significant that the first commander to be introduced to readers is Admiral Nelson, a war hero whose description is accompanied by effusive praise and the narrator’s undisguised admiration for his heroic deeds and victories. This can be interpreted as an attempt by the narrator to bias readers in favor of Nelson before they are even introduced to Vere as captain of the warship. The same year, 1797, that the events aboard the *Bellipotent* transpire, Admiral Nelson was directed to command the *Theseus*, a ship that participated in the “Great Mutiny” (i.e. the Nore mutiny) because, “danger was apprehended from the temper of the men; and it was thought that an officer like [him] was the one, not indeed to *terrorize* the crew into base subjection, but to win them, by force of his *mere presence* and heroic personality, back to an allegiance if not as enthusiastic as his own yet as true” (BB 443-4, my emphasis). Admiral Nelson, in alignment with La Perriere’s definition, does not rule with violence, but through inspiration and charisma, which require empathy and an understanding of human nature. He displays, thus, a knowledge of men. This early introduction to Nelson, who acts heroically, without violence or fear to uphold his authority and while under the same tense and potentially mutinous circumstances as Captain Vere, appears to be a

deliberate attempt by the narrator to set him up as the standard of comparison to the other captains in the text. For instance in comparison to Captain Graveling of *The Rights of Man* merchant ship from which Billy is impressed, whose “honest soul” (BB 432) preferred peace and quiet and who depended upon Billy to be his “peacemaker” (BB 433), Nelson is clearly superior. Captain Graveling does not have the commanding presence of Nelson, and, in his dependence on Billy for peace, demonstrates his inability to lead effectively since he is unable to control his own men.

However, as a more significant character in the story, it is Captain Vere’s leadership that the text undermines since Vere is depicted, both in character and in physical features, as largely forgettable; a figure meant more for mediocrity than heroism. His mediocrity is rendered even more noticeable when juxtaposed to the larger than life portrait of Admiral Nelson, whose presence in the story is accounted for as a mere digression by the narrator. Readers are first introduced to Captain Vere in chapter six of the novella, notably after the eulogistic description of Admiral Nelson in chapter four, who was mentioned even earlier in chapter three, a chapter that relates his victories at the Nile and Trafalgar while commanding men who had taken part in the Nore mutiny. It is in chapters four and five that the narrator acknowledges his digression from Billy’s story to elaborate on certain changes in naval warfare which leads to a defense of Nelson’s actions during his last battle against certain “martial utilitarians” who were critical of his choices during battle. They argue “that Nelson’s ornate publication of his person in battle was not only unnecessary, but...savored of foolhardiness and vanity” (BB 442). In effect, these utilitarians assert that by distinguishing himself from his men during his last battle, Nelson made himself an easier target, and they speculate that, had he escaped death, he might have prevented the loss of a greater number of lives. In opposition to this criticism, the narrator defends Nelson

and points out that in fact “few commanders have been so painstakingly circumspect as this same reckless declarer of his person in fight” (*BB* 442), continuing, “Personal prudence...surely is no special virtue in a military man, while an excessive love of glory, impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty, is the first” (*BB* 442). Nelson’s entire depiction implies that it is his individuality and personality that distinguishes him from other men and makes him a heroic leader. Despite the personal danger, he seeks to inspire men with his enthusiasm and bravery in battle. His actions win him praise and renown in posterity, and according to the text he is memorialized by the English poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as “the greatest sailor since our world began” (*BB* 442). His presage that his final victory in battle would be “crowned by his own glorious death” (*BB* 443) is what the narrator asserts led Nelson to have “adorned himself for the altar and the sacrifice” (*BB* 443), a decision criticized by those “Benthamites of war” (*BB* 442) as one of the causes of his unnecessary death. The evocation of the “Benthamites” alludes to the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, considered a founder of Classical Utilitarianism, the moral philosophical movement that asserts that the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals is the measure of right and wrong.<sup>2</sup> The needs of the many thus outweigh the needs of the few according to these utilitarians. It is such a position that Vere advocates during Billy’s trial, but which the narrator, in his defense of Nelson and implied disparagement of the utilitarians’ criticisms, appears to oppose, thus rendering questionable Vere’s logic.

The purpose of the narrator’s praise of Nelson’s leadership abilities in these chapters, prior to the introduction of Captain Vere, is to shape the reader’s conception of the qualities that a great leader should exhibit: empathy, personal charm, passion, courage, and confidence. For men to follow, a leader must show strength and inspire loyalty. The portrait of Nelson is what the

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<sup>2</sup>See Bentham, Jeremy. *Bentham: A Fragment on Government*. Edited by Ross Harrison, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

narrator considers to be an heroic figure who “vitalizes into acts” those “exaltations of sentiment” found in “great epics and dramas” (*BB* 443). As commander of his ship, Nelson willingly places himself in danger, exemplifying the idea that duty and courage rather than prudence, even a bit of ostentation, are qualities to be applauded in a great leader. A great leader needs to be, in a word, inspirational or larger than life in order to win men’s confidence and loyalty and to lead effectively. Loyalty and obedience, it can therefore be inferred, cannot be won through the use of deceptive practices, fear, or brute force but must be inspired, an idea reminiscent of La Perriere’s. This view that violence is not the only solution to maintaining order is likewise supported by critic Christopher Durer, who claims in his essay, “Captain Vere and Upper-Class Mores in *Billy Budd*” that, “The Nelson episode (Chapters 4 and 5) which immediately precedes the characterization of Captain Vere, drives the point home...that there are better ways of preventing disorder on board ship and assuaging the tempers of men than summary executions” (272). While Durer’s essay mainly discusses the novella in terms of a class conflict “between Billy the commoner and the upper-class values represented by the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere and his Master-at-arms, John Claggart” (270), he acknowledges the evocation of Nelson as another way to “undermine the reader’s confidence in Captain Vere” (272). In addition, the narrator’s choice of the words “altar” and “sacrifice” in relation to Nelson is significant in that it connects Nelson’s self-sacrifice for a greater cause to Billy’s portrayal as the state mandated sacrificial lamb upon the altar of Mars (*BB* 443). Both men are sacrificed for peace to be achieved. Billy and Nelson are thus comparable in that both are portrayed as willing sacrifices, Nelson consciously in his role as commander and leader for the welfare of his men, and Billy in his acceptance of the state’s decision, represented by Vere. Both men die for what is deemed the greater good, both follow the behest of their conscience in their actions, and both are



depicted in a distinctly heroic light, markedly in contrast to Vere. Captain Vere is instead analogous to, in certain qualities he exhibits, for instance, in his intellectual capabilities and the excessive prudence and secrecy of his actions, Claggart the master-at-arms and apparent villain of the story. Both Claggart and Vere likewise maintain control through strict adherence to formality and the rule of law, ostensibly in order to maintain discipline and stability aboard the ship. Notably, according to Foucault's essay, heavy reliance on the law is a characteristic of the sovereign state. The narrator of *Billy Budd* particularly notes that Vere "never tolerat[ed] an infraction in discipline" (*BB* 444). This remark recalls the earlier praise of Nelson as a leader that does not "terrorize the crew into base subjection" (*BB* 443) but wins them over with his personality, which can be seen as an indirect criticism of Vere's leadership style, where men are treated as objects rather than individuals, that is, means to an end, not as ends in themselves. In fact, the narrator explicitly states in chapter eighteen of the text that, "Captain Vere had from the beginning deemed Billy Budd to be what in the naval parlance of the time called a 'King's bargain': that is to say, for His Britannic Majesty's navy a capital investment at small outlay or none at all" (*BB* 473-4). Billy is thus commodified and assigned a material value, a fact that incites readers to contemplate how a government views its citizens, as ends in themselves or as means to ends advantageous to itself? Does the state demonstrate care for the welfare of its subjects or to maintain control, and therefore power? Vere's rationale points to the conservatism of an older form of state reason, that of the sovereign state, which relies extensively on domination through violent means to retain control, one of the criticisms leveled against a bad ruler according to La Perriere. The new governmentality that Foucault believes emerges during this period, shifts away from dominion by force to dominion through tactics that control the very thoughts, and by extension, the conduct of the individuals towards the desired end of the state.

One question invoked by the text is, whose interest does Vere's rationale serve, the population's or the state's?

Captain Vere's portrayal underscores the tension between the practices of a sovereign state and emerging new ideologies that accompany a state reason in transition. In other words, the text illuminates through Vere the conflict between a system that is reliant on violence and deception to maintain state authority and one that affirms individualism and relies on more subtle forms of control to maintain order and power. Vere thus embodies the struggle between old and new ideas of leadership and evolving moral and legal practices that converge during that particular moment of transition in the political arena. The narrator's portrayal of Captain Vere, even while acknowledging his inner moral conflict, works to undermine his legitimacy, methods, and accompanying rationale. Since he is unable to inspire his men to loyalty, Vere relies on the legal institution, deceptive practices, and the threat of violence, methods heavily employed by structures of sovereignty and for which he is criticized by the narrator in the text. His inadequacy as a memorable or charismatic leader is in fact emphasized a number of times in the text. For instance, the narrator observes that, "he was the most undemonstrative of men...not conspicuous by his stature and wearing no pronounced insignia," who exhibits an, "unobtrusiveness of demeanor" (*BB* 444-5). In fact, the narrator avers, Vere is "grave in his bearing" and "evinced little appreciation of mere humor" (*BB* 444) such that other sailors and officers aboard the ship, to whom he cannot relate, find him "lacking in the companionable quality" (*BB* 447). The narrator further underscores how unremarkable he is, how antiheroic, by pointing out that he could easily be mistaken for a civilian instead of a sailor. In comparing Vere to a civilian—or "landsman"—the narrator distances him from the rest of the men, to his disadvantage, as evidenced in chapter sixteen of the text where the narrator expounds on the qualities of each type

of man. He states that, “The sailor is frankness, the landsman is finesse. Life is not a game with the sailor...where few moves are made with straight-forwardness and ends are attained by indirection” (BB 466). That narrator’s description of Vere as a civilian supports the inference that he, comparable to Claggart, engages in games and deception to achieve morally and ethically questionable ends. To complete the portrait, Vere is further known to “betray a certain dreaminess of mood” and “would absently gaze off at the blank sea” (BB 445). His social and intellectual distance from his subordinates, along with his lackluster physical description effectively destroys any confidence in him as a Captain who can lead his men by example and with the enthusiasm so remarkable in Nelson. The juxtaposition of these captains thus prejudices the reader’s perception of Vere and plants doubt about his ability to evoke loyalty or obedience in his subordinates. From a Foucauldian standpoint, Nelson is more closely aligned with the new type of leader that a more progressive social system requires, one that is not reliant on threat of violence and fear. Nelson typifies what Nikolas Rose, an adherent of Foucault’s concepts (which he elaborates on in his book, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*), believes is the new form of social control in the era of governmentality he discusses. He claims that, “To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one’s own objectives.” The objective of a more modern system of government thus involves an understanding of “the domains and entities to be governed” (Intro. 4). Throughout the text, Vere displays a lack of understanding of his men, both officers and the crew, which is integral in a good and effective ruler.

To govern well, the text suggests that, not only must an effective leader display empathy, but he must also be trustworthy and reliable, traits that Nelson possess, but which are demonstrably lacking in Captain Vere. For example, Vere’s dependability as a leader is rendered

questionable through the narrator's emphasis on his aberrant behavior after Claggart is accidentally killed by Billy. As state representative, Vere must reflect the stability and dependability of an enduring institution, especially in volatile situations, such as a potentially mutinous ship. Citizens must have faith in their leaders and institutions in order to obey and follow their prescriptions and laws, but Vere's apparently irrational conduct is instead noted and criticized by some of his subordinates, suggesting a loss of faith in their leader. The text highlights these inconsistencies by presenting situations that, based on the earlier characterization of Vere by the narrator, appear out of character, prompting readers to question his state of mind, which it can be argued is destabilized by the moral conflict within him. While having been especially noted for his prudence, calmness, and judiciousness earlier in the text, the questionable haste with which he proceeds with Billy's trial, his "unwonted agitation" and "his excited exclamations" (*BB* 479) observed by the ship's surgeon, leads the entire drumhead court to doubt whether he is acting logically or even sanely. The narrator adds to the ambiguousness of determining his sanity or insanity, by asserting, "Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford" (*BB* 479-480). The text, in this manner, challenges readers to look beyond the surface of the story, and attend closely to the subtleties at work within it. For example, there are instances of irony where, through well-meaning actions intended to avert potential violence and dangerous speculations from the crew, Vere actually initiates the chain of events that lead to both Claggart's and Billy's deaths as well as to disquiet amongst the crew. To begin with, instead of demanding evidence from Claggart in support of his claims, Vere discreetly organizes a private confrontation between the two men to ascertain for himself whether "Claggart was a false witness" (*BB* 475). His logic

in doing so is to prevent “the matter at once getting abroad, which...might undesirably affect the ship’s company” (*BB* 474-475). His lack of openness with his men leads to the mistrust and unwanted speculation he was attempting by these measures to avoid. His secrecy and “quiet, undemonstrative way” (*BB* 475) also contrasts unfavorably when compared to Nelson’s frank style of leadership and his open and ostentatious manner. Vere’s anxiety about the temperament of the men possibly indicates his fear that he would be unable to suppress any outbreaks of rebelliousness from them, particularly since immediate assistance from the rest of the fleet was not possible. During this meeting among the three men—Vere, Claggart, and Billy—Billy’s inability to vocalize his innocence against Claggart’s accusation, which sometimes happens under moments of extreme excitement according to the narrator, and which is further ironically exacerbated by Vere’s kindly and paternal behavior towards him, triggers Billy to lash out instinctively in anger with his only available outlet: violence. One unintentionally lethal punch from Billy immediately kills Claggart. Thus, in attempting to prevent violence, Vere actually precipitates it. Additionally, the text encourages one to question Vere’s desire for legal proceedings, given that, not only does he have entire authority over the trial’s outcome, he appears to have already determined Billy’s punishment in chapter nineteen, where “he vehemently exclaimed, ‘Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!’” (*BB* 478). The trial then, it can be argued, is to uphold the illusion of fairness and justice. Vere, as sole witness, judge, and jury, renders it a farce and his arguments therefore specious. The trial, in this light, can be read as a mere formality to uphold the appearance of justice to the men on board, and to address and appease the scruples of the conflicted officers.

In addition, the narrative contains instances that allude to a more complicated interpretation of the novella’s meaning and imply an alliance with the progressive ideals of

revolutionary France and America rather than with the existing sovereign power of Great Britain that Vere defends. For example, Vere's indirection and haste regarding Billy's trial fuels criticism from the officers, and even doubts about his sanity. Rather than circumventing commentary and speculation, he provokes it with his irrational conduct. It illustrates one instance where the text uses dramatic irony to destabilize the reader's confidence in Vere's decision-making abilities. In his efforts "to guard as much as possible against publicity," the narrator suggests, "[Vere] may or may not have erred...Certain it is...that subsequently in the confidential talk of more than one or two gun rooms and cabins he was not a little criticized by some officers" (BB 480). The unusual activity and lengthy disappearance of Claggart and Billy is thus observed and commented upon by the ship's company, leading to rumors and speculation throughout the ship. The presence of additional instances of irony is pointed out by two other critics. For example, referencing chapter seven of the novella, where the narrator describes Vere as having a "bias" towards "those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era" (BB 446), Christopher Durer posits: "is it not supreme irony, since Vere has learned nothing from those books?" (273). In reality, the narrator reveals that Vere cannot relate to "actual men" and his "discourse never fell into the jocosely familiar" (BB 447). Durer cites another critic in his ironic reading of the text to support his assessment of Vere, Joseph Schiffman, who wrote, "Final Stage, Irony: A Re-Examination of *Billy Budd* Criticism." Schiffman interprets the entire novella as a work of irony, meaning that it still upholds Melville's well-known democratic and progressive ideals so prevalent in his past writings. Schiffman claims that the text has been misunderstood as a reversion to conservatism by some critics

through a superficial examination of the tale.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is Melville's apparently sympathetic portrayal of Captain Vere (which textual evidence presented earlier demonstrates otherwise) as well as the misinterpretation of the last words of Billy Budd as he faces execution: "God bless Captain Vere!" (*BB* 497), which Schiffman claims is considered out of context in critical assessments of the text. The work itself, according to Schiffman, should not be taken out of context either historically or literarily, which is to say, it should not be considered in isolation from Melville's earlier works. In support of his interpretation of the text, Schiffman points to another critic, F. O. Matthiessen who is one of the few to discuss the influence of the "Gilded Age" in shaping Melville's thinking. This is a period from the end of the civil war to the beginning of the First World War, when the perceived detachment of the educated classes in legal matters was much criticized. Such a detachment is somewhat mirrored in Vere, who, in addition to his lack of companionable qualities, some officers observe to be a "dry and bookish gentleman...with a queer streak of the pedantic running through him" (*BB* 447). Schiffman's ironic conception of Vere undermines the sympathetic portrait of him propounded by earlier critics. One of the strongest arguments in favor of Melville's conservatism, Schiffman contends, has to do with the misunderstanding of Billy's last words by critics. Given the intellectual limitations of Billy constantly reiterated by the narrator, who describes him as "the young barbarian" (*BB* 495) "to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge" (*BB* 437), those words are rendered almost meaningless. Billy, illiterate and inexperienced, is not aware of gradations of meaning and in his simple nature cannot perceive the injustice of Vere's actions during his trial. Schiffman claims that, "many critics mistook Melville's irony for a change in his thinking, rather than a richer development of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Charles Weir Jr and E. L. Grant Watson.

his craft” (134). Some additional moments of irony that Schiffman points out center around Billy’s death, a death meant to quell any thoughts of incipient rebellion but which could also be interpreted as a catalyst for mutinous thoughts. This is evidenced, for instance, by the murmurs of the crew after Billy is hanged. In chapter twenty-seven, the narrator assesses the crew’s reaction to the hanging, stating that:

Being inarticulate, [the murmuring] was dubious in significance further than it seemed to indicate some capricious *revulsion* of thought or feeling such as mobs ashore are liable to, in the present instance possibly implying a sullen *revocation* on the men’s part of their *involuntary* echoing of Billy’s benediction. (*BB* 499, my emphasis)

The use of the word “involuntary” implies that the men behaved instinctively in their repetition of Billy’s blessing, and once they become conscious of its meaning, that is, once suspicion of injustice dawns upon the men, they appear discontented and seem about to react, perhaps violently; “But,” as the narrator points out, “ere the murmur had time to wax into clamor it was met by *strategic* command” (*BB* 499, my emphasis). The potential of a violent reaction from the men is disrupted as the men automatically resume their duties, thus, “yielding to the mechanism of discipline” (*BB* 499). If not for the strong conditioning of the men to obedience, particularly in a military setting, the text implies that the men might not have so easily accepted Billy’s death. But, as the narrator asserts: “Every sailor...is accustomed to obey orders without debating them; his life afloat is externally ruled for him” (*BB* 467). If the ship is a reflection of society at large, this assertion invites readers to consider how much of their ideals, values, and customs are automatically accepted or followed mechanically, without consideration of how or why they have developed and for what ends.



The text appears to emphasize these instances where the crew is manipulated through customs and rituals to elucidate some of the methods used by state authority to ensure obedience. In the novella arbitrary rituals are often utilized to distract men and keep them occupied with meaningless activities in order to prevent potentially dangerous conjectures during their idle hours. A state of ignorance, or at least of limited knowledge, the text suggests, is one of the securities against rebellion. This logic implies that if men are allowed to develop their intelligence it would lead to criticism of the status quo, which in turn, would lead to rebellion. However, as noted earlier, this logic is a feature of the sovereign state, and no longer applies to the new form of governance beginning to emerge, according to both Foucault and Rose. Rose asserts that, “To govern is to recognize [the individual’s] capacity for action” and “to act upon that action...[which] entails trying to understand what mobilizes the domains or entities to be governed...[and to] instrumentalize them in order to shape actions, processes and outcomes in desired directions” (4). The novella’s description of Nelson, in his capacity to relate to his men and in his ability to command respect and obedience from his men without the use of fear or force, embodies the new style of leadership that Rose claims would be a feature of the emerging governmentality.

Vere’s continued use of methods of control associated with older forms of government, ones that depend on the threat of violence to maintain order, illustrates how custom and habit is used to shape individual conduct in the novella. Vere’s inability to evolve with the times is evidenced in the narrator’s assertion that his “settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise” (*BB* 446). Fear of punishment as a preventative measure to rebellion is a common feature of oppressive leadership. Vere’s insistence on adhering to the letter of the law and “established custom” reflects his conservatism

and demonstrates how the state not only controls the physical relations between men, by creating or upholding hierarchies based on arbitrary criteria, such as, intelligence, wealth, social status, etc., but also conditions them mentally, through long established, therefore seldom questioned, customs, rituals, and social norms that have become second nature to men with the passage of time. As evidenced in chapter twenty-one, after Vere has terminated his address to the court, the narrator describes the scene:

The *troubled* court sat silent. *Loyal* lieges, plain and practical, though at bottom they dissented from some points Captain Vere had put to them, they were without the *faculty*, hardly had the inclination, to gainsay one whom they felt to be an earnest man, one too not less *their superior in mind* than in naval rank. But it is not improbable that even such of his words as were not without influence over them, less came home to them than his closing appeal to their *instinct* as sea officers. (*BB* 488, my emphasis)

Though “troubled” and not in entire agreement with his reasoning, the men are also conscious that they have neither the ability nor the power to overrule Vere’s decrees. Their loyalty, belief in Vere as their intellectual superior, and instinct, are what in the end stifle their doubts, not to mention the fact that opposition would be considered mutinous and would potentially lead to the same end as Billy met. In this way, not only brute force but the values and beliefs long inculcated in the men through state sanctioned institutions, merge to become a network of manipulation, through which the state, in the form of Vere, ensures obedience and retains control of its subjects. Coupled with the authority granted to him by the state, Vere thus uses these rhetorical strategies, the objective of

which is the preservation of the state, to try to win the court over to his opinion including preying on the officers' fears of insurrection, of punishment for disobedience, and of physical danger from both mutinous sailors and French vessels which they could encounter at any moment. He appeals to their instinctual obedience to authority and relies on their patriotism, reminding them of the loyalty due to the state to which they swore their allegiance and which provides security from outside dangers. The relation of Vere to his men is comparable to that of state sanctioned authorities and establishments that directly influence individuals within that society, through the espousal of particular ideologies and by disseminating ideas and values that support the existing political structure. It is also noteworthy that any mention of the state's obligation to the individual and his rights, is conspicuously absent, implying that the practical necessities of the state outweigh any moral obligation to the individual, a patently utilitarian ideal. In this way, *Billy Budd* highlights how one's ideas can be manipulated by the state and its representatives through various rationalizations to attain the state's desired ends, which consequently raises doubts about the authenticity, and by extension, the legitimacy of state authority. It also underscores how insignificant the individual subject's needs become under such a rationale.

The novella emphasizes the importance of rules, regular routines, and the rigidity of the hierarchy aboard the warship to demonstrate on a smaller scale some of the ways in which the state ensures its authority is maintained. This is done, for example, through the implementation of laws, regulations, a hierarchy of command, and the encouragement and promotion of customs, superstitions, traditions, etc. so that subjects conform almost instinctively. Deviation from these rules can be subject to disciplinary action or social ostracism depending on the extent of the

deviant act. This ensures continued obedience through one of the government's main weapons, fear of punishment. This authority, the novella suggests, is granted by its citizens, not only through fear, but also through social conditioning in collaboration with other tactics and strategies. Some of the ways the ruling power manipulates the population include: the edicts of the law, the emphasis on the duties of the citizen, requiring absolute obedience to authority figures, the promotion of nationalism, and enforcing prescribed and prohibited norms of behavior. The narrator claims that, "True martial discipline long continued superinduces in average man a sort of impulse whose operation at the official word of command much resembles in its promptitude the effect of an instinct" (BB 500). Similarly, it can be inferred, individuals under any socio-political system can be conditioned by state logic into instinctive submission, through similar customs, rituals, and formalities, features prevalent in highly civilized societies, that is, societies that have developed complex relations amongst men, reflected in a multitude of institutions of authority, and intricate social networks that are linked in ways often too complicated to trace.

Not only is control of behavior important, according to the narrative, but also control of perception is integral to maintaining control over the crew, as indicated in several instances throughout the text, particularly in the secrecy demanded by Vere during and after the trial. After Billy's trial, the narrator writes, "His transfer under guard... was effected without unusual precautions – at least no *visible* ones....the prisoner had strict orders to let no one have communication with him...And certain *unobtrusive* measures were taken to absolutely ensure this point" (BB 492, my emphasis). The narrator explicitly confirms, "If possible, not to let men so much as surmise that their officers anticipate aught amiss from them is the tacit rule in a military ship" (BB 492). Any sign of weakness, claims Vere in chapter twenty-one, "would be

deadly to discipline” (BB 488). Such is the rationale behind Vere’s insistence on secrecy and haste, to distract the men from reflecting on their status under this authority.

The novella suggests that another one of the methods utilized by the state to maintain control of the populace is the dissemination of false information, with the dual purpose of both upholding particular national ideals, as well as vilifying actions deemed subversive to the state. Through such state-sanctioned institutions as newspapers, which are presented as official, therefore trustworthy and reliable sources of information, the state can legitimize its conduct in various ways, one of which is to create an “other” or common enemy to ensure support and obedience. For instance, the narrator provides an account of the incidents aboard the *Bellipotent* that, “appeared in a naval chronicle of the time, an *authorized* weekly publication” (BB 502, my emphasis), an account that not only relates gross inaccuracies, and inverts the characters of the men involved, but also deliberately falsifies information so that national feeling is stirred up against “the assassin [who] was no Englishman but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens whom the present extraordinary necessities of the service have caused to be admitted into it in considerable numbers” (BB 503). The writer clearly intends to incense readers of the publication against a made-up enemy, while unifying Englishmen by igniting their patriotic pride. This highlights how information can be manipulated to achieve the state’s objectives, whatever they might be at the time, and leads one to question how trustworthy the sources are from which information is distributed. Are these sources unbiased or do they have a specific agenda? How many public institutions work in collusion to impose ideologies that are advantageous to the state? It also begs the question, in what other ways and through what other means is the population manipulated to willingly support and obey the dictates of state authority?

Despite the many means of deception, repression, and injustice illuminated by the novella, the hope of an awakening, of the incipient consciousness of these practices by the multitude, is also present in the narrative. This hope is intimidated by the doubts, scruples, critiques, and “murmurs” of Vere’s subordinates related by the narrator, particularly on the occasion of Billy’s hanging. The narrative implies that once an awareness of their manipulation by these systems of control is achieved by a majority of individuals, change becomes possible. The revolution occurring in France at the time, and the already established United States, suggests that traditional systems of control are no longer viable in a world of rapidly developing nations and global expansion. Vere’s fear that, “unless quick action was taken on it, the deed of the foretopman [Billy]...would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew” (*BB* 481), implies that the potential for rebellion is ever present, and can easily be aroused under the right circumstances, hence strict discipline must be maintained. Despite Vere’s efforts to extinguish it however, distrust and suspicion, along with a budding awareness of an injustice of some sort having taken place, emerges in both the crew and the officers during and after Billy’s trial.

The narrator’s transformation of Billy’s hanging into an almost supernatural or religious experience supports the idea that Billy’s death is an injustice perpetrated by the state and demonstrates the fact that the state, through its representatives and institutions, can exercise its power unjustly to serve its own interests. While Billy’s death could have been depicted as commonplace and ordinary, the narrator’s description represents him as a Jesus-like figure, spiritualizing his death through the use of religious overtones and Christian imagery, reinforcing the idea of his innocence, thus insinuating that the text’s stance is opposed to Vere’s, and consequently, the state’s. Jesus and Billy are comparable in their perception as criminals by state

authorities, by the fact that they are considered sacrifices for the greater good of society, and are both sentenced to death. Pontius Pilate is a figure comparable to Vere in his paternal regard for the supposed criminal, though he did not render judgment. To further establish the enduring fame of Billy's death, the narrator recounts the transformation of the pole from which Billy was hanged from a mere object to something sacred for the sailors: "The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some few years kept trace of by the bluejackets... To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross" (*BB* 503). Billy is thus, again comparably to Jesus, transformed from a criminal into a symbol of hope for the common man. Critic Joyce Sparer Adler, in her essay, "*Billy Budd* and Melville's Philosophy of War," conceives of the tale as a "narrative of man's silence transmuted into poetry" (277). The story in this way provides inspiration for others but can also be construed as a reminder of injustice, consequently, a call to rebel against the unjust practices of those holding power. Thus, in another instance of irony, rather than memorialized as a criminal, a version the authorized newspaper account at the end of the novella attempts to foster, Billy is instead transformed into a martyr and reborn as a symbol of hope for the sailors. It is also notable that his death is as exceptional as Nelson's, and both are long preserved in the memories of men, in contrast to Vere's more prosaic and soon forgotten exit. During battle, as the narrator informs readers, Vere is disabled by a musket ball and "with the rest of the wounded was put ashore" [where he] "lingered for some days" (*BB* 502) until the end. Upon his demise, the narrator postulates that, "The spirit that 'spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame" (*BB* 502). Again, ironically, it is Billy whose fame endures longer than his short life, sustained in the memories of the "bluejackets" (*BB* 504) and preserved in an anonymous ballad at the end of the tale. Once more the text parallels Billy to Nelson, in his immortalization, both

through the preservation of his heroic deeds in history, the record of a nation's memory, as well as in his depiction in Tennyson's poem.

The multiple parallels drawn between Nelson and Billy, and the narrator's descriptions of their impact on the men around them, serves to illustrate how alternative styles of leadership and types of leaders can achieve the same objective through different methods. Both Nelson and Billy are notably approved of by the populace and embody qualities that distinguish them as heroic and virtuous beings, endowed with the ability to transform violence into peace, without themselves resorting to violence. For example, the narrator writes of Billy: "he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor...gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules" (*BB* 436), and elsewhere notes that, "the form of Billy Budd was heroic" (*BB* 458). His influence upon other men is also comparable to Nelson's: "But Billy came; and it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy...a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones" (*BB* 433). According to Captain Graveling, of the merchant ship *Rights of Man*, where Billy served before being impressed onto the *Bellipotent*, "Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd" (*BB* 433). He further refers to him as his "peacemaker" (*BB* 433). Billy's presence is enough to bring order and harmony to an otherwise tumultuous situation, a feat that Nelson likewise accomplishes aboard the *Theseus*. A good leader, this suggests, does not use fear as a tactic to preserve authority. Aboard the *Rights of Man*, according to Captain Graveling, "they [the crew] all love him. Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him...Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd" (*BB* 433). Billy's presence alone, like Nelson's, is sufficient to make men love and respect him. Both men are presented as authentic, and inspire loyalty due to their exceptional and charismatic natures, rather than through the use of fear, force, or manipulation. This portrayal of different styles of leadership enables readers to compare,



unfavorably, the techniques and tactics used by Captain Vere in later chapters of the story, when he likewise must preserve discipline and ensure the allegiance of a potentially mutinous crew.

Aspects of Vere's personality, such as his conservatism, his strict adherence to formalities, and his inability to relate to other men, are critiqued in the text not only to further underscore his innate inability to be an effective leader, but also to emphasize the fact that this type of mentality and conduct cannot long survive in the new world being formed. Not only is a more open, charismatic leader needed, but also a progressive, less rigid form of government is required, one that considers the individual to be an end, rather than a means to be exploited. Utilizing Foucault's assessment of a sovereign state, Vere's social and intellectual distance from his men, along with the other traits before noted, mirror the likewise growing distance of the mentality of the older system of power compared with the ideals of personal freedom and the liberal notions of a new type of government gradually taking over. For instance, the narrator makes it known that this Captain of a warship is "popularly known by the appellation 'Starry Vere'" who "whatever his sterling qualities was without any brilliant ones" (BB 445). He is painted as a dreamer whose mind is constantly at a distance from his reality and whose personality is mediocre at best, in direct contrast to both Nelson and Billy who are popular, amongst officers and sailors alike. This mode of criticism undermining Vere's ability to command is reiterated throughout chapters six and seven. In the very first paragraph preceding Vere's description, the narrator states that, "officers of a warship naturally take their tone from the commander, that is *if* he have that ascendancy of character that *ought* to be his" (BB 444, emphasis mine). This is comment insinuates that Vere lacks the necessary tone or ascendancy of character so lauded in Nelson. This sentence then prompts readers to be alert and judge whether his actions throughout the story depict a hero or a dictatorial leader. The narrator furthermore

renders questionable the legitimacy of Vere's position as commander by instilling doubts as to whether his alliance to nobility might not have played a more significant role in winning him the position, commenting, "Though allied to the higher nobility, his advancement had not been *altogether* owing to influences connected to that circumstance" (BB 444, my emphasis). The use of the word *altogether* suggests that his high station in society played at least some part in advancing him to his current role. Noting also that he evinced a modesty that "suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind" (BB 445), the narrator emphasizes Vere's connection to the aristocracy, arguably to highlight again the social distance between him and his subordinates, the majority of whom are from the lowest, and possibly criminal (as the text implies), strata of society. Both Vere's personality and social distance do not permit him to understand, and therefore to lead his men. This view is supported by Christopher Durer who claims that, "Melville is at pains to provide in his delineation of Captain Vere a type of English aristocrat...he is presented to us [as] a conservative gentleman with a strong inclination for the things of the past" (271). He asserts that Vere possesses an, "allegiance to an aristocratic code of behavior which puts a high premium on obedience and meticulous execution of orders" (272). Vere's social distance from his men, as well as the strict adherence to formality, are again reinforced in chapter eighteen of the text when Claggart first approaches Vere to accuse Billy of mutinous intent:

The spot where Claggart stood was the place allotted to men of *lesser* grades seeking some more particular interview with the officer of the deck or the captain himself. But from the latter it was not often that a sailor or petty officer of those days would seek a hearing; only some exceptional cause would, according to *established custom*, have warranted that. (BB 470, my emphasis)

Vere's social station is such that only under exceptional circumstances are any from the lower rung of the ship's society able to seek his attention without presumption. Notably, deviations from "established custom" are clearly not encouraged, and may even invite chastisement. In fact, the narrator claims that some even deemed him a "martinet" who "would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything'" (BB 501). Thus, not only is he figuratively beyond the reach of his crew but he is literally as well, unlike Nelson, "the entire characterization of [whom] avoids any allusions to his social or family background" (Durer 272). The portraits of these two leaders lay the groundwork for readers to examine the many differences between them. They are invited by the text to consider what these differences mean in terms of leadership and to consider a leader's relation to his or her subordinates. While some critics assert that the text supports Vere's rationale and that he is therefore portrayed sympathetically, the comparison to Nelson and the many ways the narrator undermines him, as argued earlier, refutes that notion.<sup>4</sup> Though both men are described as capable commanders during the same period of tension, Vere dies forgotten and alone, lost to posterity except for a few lines in the navy's "authorized weekly publication" (BB 502), while Nelson is lauded as the greatest sailor of all time whose fame endures long after his death. The textual evidence therefore appears critical of Vere's logic and conservatism, and appears to advocate instead Nelson's attributes and style of leadership, which are more aligned with a progressive form governing.

The novella thus casts doubt as to Captain Vere's reasoning, abilities, motives, and conduct in his position as leader of the warship and state representative, in order to criticize the ideals and methods of an older rationale of what Foucault terms governmentality. It prompts readers to ask consider what the needs of a changing system of government might be and to

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, Larry J. *Billy Budd and American labor unrest: the case for striking back*.

delve into the type of leadership and governing such a system requires to be successful. The text also considers how significant the role of a leader is in government and how a nation fares under different styles of leadership.

### **State's Rights versus Individual Rights**

Vere's decision to hang Billy Budd can be interpreted not only as evidence that he doubts his own capacity to inspire order, lacking as he does the requisite "ascendancy of character" that the narrator suggests an effective commander must possess, but also that, as a result, Vere's authority must rely on fear and the threat of violence as effective deterrents to disobedience. Billy must be sacrificed so that Vere can preserve his authority, which he implies, would be undermined were he to show any lenience or delay in Billy's punishment. In response to the sailing master's appeal for clemency in his sentence, Vere contends:

Your clement sentence they [the crew] would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them – afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles. What shame to us such a conjecture on their part, and how deadly to discipline. (*BB* 488)

Vere not only appeals to the court's fears of mutiny, but by alluding to the possibility they would be perceived as cowardly, weak, and afraid by the crew he arouses their pride as well. He further affirms the "military necessity" of the judgment, implying there is no choice in the matter but the one he advocates (*BB* 488). The martial law that Vere invokes judges only the consequences of an act, without taking into account any potentially extenuating circumstances that might have affected it, and with no concern for the intent of the perpetrator of the crime. Such a utilitarian

fixation on consequence recalls the narrator's satirical attitude earlier in the text in reference to those "Benthamites of war" from whom he defended Nelson. Taking this incident into account, one can argue that the narrator does not share Vere's rationale, which essentially converts individual subjects into mere objects that either facilitate or hinder the objectives of the state. What does this imply about the values the state represents and upholds? The text appears to posit that the maintenance of power and authority are the sole ends that concern the state. Any obstacles that threaten the stability of said state must as such be dealt with swiftly to avoid the spread of discontent and unnecessary ruminations in the rest of the populace. Vere appears to propound such an argument during the trial, indicating that the needs of the state outweigh the rights of the citizen, a viewpoint seemingly opposed to the ideas the narrator endorses.

The logic that Vere utilizes to justify Billy's penalty, his emphasis on Billy's necessary sacrifice to ensure the stability and order of the ship, mirrors the logic of the state, where societal needs supposedly justify the suppression of individual rights. This logic, it can be argued, is not solely due to the independent reasoning of the captain, but is the result of the social conditioning inherent in participation in a civil society. The values of the state, disseminated in multiform ways, from religion, to pedagogy, to social customs, and mandates from other state sanctioned institutions, have been so ingrained in Vere, that he is unable to perceive any other, more peaceable, course of action. According to Joyce Sparer Adler, "His response is the result of conditioning so strong that his verdict has the force of an instinct...[s]o thoroughly has Vere been dedicated to the ritual of war that to him it seems Fate" (268). While Vere is conflicted morally, he is conditioned to follow the dictates of the state rather than the behests of his own conscience, which he suppresses. He declares instead that he, and every officer, must conform to the standards set by the political system in place, a system in which they consciously participate;

the standards of which it should be noted, are reflected and enforced through both its laws and its social norms and ritualized behaviors. Positive or man-made law therefore supersedes divine or higher law according to Vere. In describing the chaplain's visits to Billy after his judgment, the narrator expresses similar sentiments:

Bluntly put, a chaplain is a minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War – Mars...he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because he too lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force. (*BB* 495-6)

Vere also acknowledges a divine law when he exclaims upon Claggart's death: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang" (*BB* 478), but still regards his duties to the state to be of primary importance, probably due to the social conditioning Adler hypothesizes. The novella thus emphasizes how existing state-sanctioned systems of control—religious, legal, political, and social—collude to manipulate the members of its population into unquestioning subservience.

One of the ways in which the novella criticizes forms of state control over the population is through another state sanctioned representative, the surgeon's, assessment of Vere's mental state prior to Billy's trial. The text insinuates that Vere's sanity is affected by the internal conflict he experiences while deciding Billy's fate. Even as a high ranking state representative, Vere is not outside its control. State reason thus exercises control over the entire population. In this new mentality, according to Foucault, "Interest at the level of consciousness of each individual who goes to make up the population...is the new target and the fundamental instrument of the government of population" (Foucault 100). The field of health, both mental and physical, thus becomes another site for definition, control, and enforcement of normative behavior on a

population. Vere's sanity is rendered questionable through the surgeon's evaluation of his unusual outbursts and erratic behavior, in conjunction with the observations of his officers. The surgeon surmises, "Was Captain Vere suddenly affected in his mind...?"... "Was he unhinged?" (*BB* 479). The novella, through these means, implies that conformity to normative behavior is expected from all members of the population, and behavior outside the norm can be subject to disciplinary action. An alternate reading is presented by critic Joyce Adler, who asserts that, "The question thus raised about Vere's sanity is a symbolic one, the concrete poetic expression of Melville's long conception of war as the 'madness' in men" (268). In this interpretation, the text can be read as an indictment of war, and by extension, the logic associated with its justifications, personified in its mouthpiece and representative, Captain Vere. In his adopted policy of secrecy, for instance, the text compares him to "Peter the Barbarian" (*BB* 480). This is significant due to the fact that barbarity and primitiveness have thus far been associated with Billy and men of lower ranks, but in this case what is barbaric are the repressive and deceptive practices of governmental policy. Evidence of Adler's claim that Vere's questionable sanity (mirroring the state's logic) reflects Melville's conception of war as madness can be found in chapter twenty-four of the text. While describing Billy and his surroundings as he calmly awaits his impending death "under sentry lying prone in irons" (*BB* 493), the narrator describes his surroundings on the upper gun deck and particularly comments on the two battle lanterns barely illuminating Billy, observing that they were: "Fed with the oil supplied by the war contractors (whose gains, honest or otherwise, are in every land an anticipated portion of the harvest of death)" (*BB* 493). The images and ideas evoked by the term "harvest of death" are disturbing and can be interpreted as an indictment of the practice.

The narrative also highlights how individuals can be controlled by the state through the limitation of choice. The state can, like Vere, manipulate the conduct of individuals through manipulation of their perceived choices. In other words, by presenting the public with false choices, or with no choice at all, the government can ensure that citizens act in accordance with the goals of the state. For example, Vere's decision to conceal Billy's crime and trial from his men takes away their ability to form their own judgments about Billy's guilt and underscores the paternalism inherent in the state's rationale. The men's freedom of choice is taken away. The surgeon, for instance, is the first to know of Claggart's death and is according to the text, "disturbed by a request [from Vere] that, as implying a desire for secrecy, seemed unaccountably strange to him, there was nothing for the subordinate to do but comply" (*BB* 478). From Vere's perspective, the seeds of insurrection would be planted at even the mention of possible mutiny, thus secrecy is necessary for the greater good. In "*Billy Budd: Melville's Dilemma*," Lester H. Hunt's reading of this scene is as follows:

To use stealth in gaining and keeping power over others is to circumvent their capacity to reason and make choices of their own....It is an attempt...to violate individual autonomy and substitute it for the rule of brute force. Vere's secrecy, then, involves him in the sacrifice of one of the fundamental values of a liberal society; respect for the reason and will of the individual. (285)

In this way, Vere dismisses the men's ability to think for themselves, reflecting the state's disregard for individuals and dismissal of their needs in its desire to maintain power. Hunt further notes that, "The manner in which Melville draws the contrast between Vere's secrecy and Nelson's publicity brings into painful relief the ethically troubling nature of Vere's policy"



(286). However, given that in times of war the consideration of civil liberties comes second to the state's needs, Vere is acting in alignment with state policies. Therefore, if Vere's policy during Billy's trial is "ethically troubling" as Hunt points out, and as evidenced by the questioning from his own men, then this is further proof that the narrative is critiquing the moral stance of the state itself. Vere's position reflects once again the morality of the utilitarians, who consider the needs of the many to outweigh those of the individual; this position regards repression of the individual's rights as not morally wrong if it benefits the majority. The text, thus, indirectly posits the question: do the ends justify the means?

The text further demonstrates other methods by which the state manipulates its subjects to privilege state welfare over its own citizens, for example, by legitimizing arbitrary practices into formalized rules; put differently, the state establishes formal procedures, laws, customs, moral imperatives, etc. until they become normalized and are followed instinctively. Thus, the text illustrates how the "government of conduct," discussed by Nikolas Rose, occurs. Rose claims that, "political and religious authorities now understood their powers and obligations in terms of relatively formalized doctrines of rule which made it necessary and legitimate for them to exercise a calculated power over the conduct of populations of individuals" (25). Not only does Billy act, or rather *not* act in his own benefit, instead trusting Vere to be his voice, other examples in the text of these forces acting separately but towards the same goal of control of conduct are, for instance, the priest, representing religion, being used to legitimize the often immoral conduct of the state's agents; the doctor used to condemn Vere's mental state; or the placement of arbitrary values on the status of birth or physical appearance of men, to name a few. The lack of autonomy and choice that Vere's subordinates experience with regard to the outcome of the trial demonstrates how fear of punishment and long habituation to obedience,

enforced by the state, impact their actions. As the narrator points out, “No more trying a situation is conceivable than that of a subordinate officer under a captain whom he suspects to be not mad, indeed, but yet not quite unaffected in his intellects. To argue his order to him would be insolence. To resist him would be mutiny” (*BB* 479). In this instance, the idea of the authority of the Law and all it represents is so inculcated in citizens that they cannot see any other choice but obedience. Men thus considered lower in rank especially have limited choice in their mode of behavior towards a superior. The only choice they have is acceptance otherwise they are liable to negative consequences. Any deviation from duty is punished, as Billy horrifyingly witnesses in the “first formal gangway-punishment” (*BB* 451) in chapter nine. Fear of punishment is here shown to be a powerful weapon to ensure obedience and conformity to a customary mode of existence, even though it is repressive and exploitative. The surgeon, though having all these doubts, cannot but obey his commander since the structure of command is particularly rigid on a warship. The presentation of these doubts in the text raises questions such as those addressed in Brook Thomas’s article “*Billy Budd* and the Untold Story of the Law,” in which he asks, “Why...are certain institutional constraints accepted rather than others?” and claims that, “at particular moments in history some modes of interpretation serve the interests of some segments of society at the expense of others” (50). Vere’s logic, upheld by the institutions he represents, such as the British Navy and aristocracy, serves the interests of the state over those of its citizens. His act of interpretation of events thus privileges the existing power structure in place. A criticism of Vere therefore implies a criticism of the conservative stance he defends throughout the text through his words and actions.

According to textual evidence, an individual’s perspective and value system is influenced and informed by his or her social status, thereby influencing his or her conduct and interactions

in society. For instance, the narrator makes note of Vere's aristocratic background, contrasting it to the majority of his crew who appear to have sprung from all walks of life, to illuminate their differing viewpoints. This indicates an individual's outlook and values are determined largely by position he or she occupies in society, and since each class has its particular set of ideologies, his or her judgment would naturally vary. This provokes questions about how one's ideas are formed and influenced and impels one to consider what circumstances might contribute to forming the conclusions reached. Throughout the novella differing perspectives are taken into account, which provides an insight into the thought processes of some of the characters. For instance, with regard to Vere and the officers, the text presents different assessments of the situation, which allude to the various motivations of the individuals described, though Vere can and does overrule them through the authority the state has invested in him. According to Vere's perspective, "a martial court must confine... its attention to the blow's consequence" (BB 484) not to the intent of the striker (Billy). In the three officers' view, "Couched in [Vere's answer] seemed to them a meaning unanticipated, involving a prejudgment on the speaker's part" (BB 484). Again the narrator notes: "in a tone of suggestive dubiety" (BB 484) the soldier points out that no one else was there to illuminate matters regarding Claggart's motives, a point Vere insists is irrelevant. The men argue for lenience or delay in sentencing since Billy is morally innocent, if not in fact, certainly in intent. Vere overrules them, however, believing that they are not "intellectually mature" enough to grasp the potentially negative consequences of a lenient or delayed sentence. He further asserts that they are "men with whom it was necessary to demonstrate certain principles which were axioms to himself" (BB 485). These thoughts betray the paternalistic and condescending attitude of a patriarchal system that acts dictatorially and justifies it by inferring that the masses are not endowed with the intellectual capacity to discern what is in their best

interest. Vere thus strips his men of all authority and autonomy. “Consequence,” alone matters according to him thus he reminds the men that their duty is to judge in accordance with martial law, declaring: “But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King” (BB 486). He continues, “in receiving our commissions we...ceased to be natural free agents” (BB 486). They have, by this logic, traded freedom for security. This remark evokes Thomas Hobbes’s contention that a citizen’s allegiance, once they enter into a social contract, should be to the laws that ensure the continuance of that society over other considerations. In his actions and rationale, Vere notably espouses these ideas, particularly in his arguments to the court.<sup>5</sup> From his perspective, he sees his actions as in alignment with official policy: “he was glad it would not be at variance with usage to turn the matter over to a summary court of his own officers, reserving to himself, as the one on whom the ultimate responsibility would rest, the right of maintaining a supervision of it” (BB 481). In order to successfully convert the men to his point of view, Vere employs a number of strategies. He exploits the men’s fears, both of punishment and physical endangerment from mutiny; he appeals to their patriotic impulses; and finally relies on the expected obedience inculcated in the men through various state institutions, which contribute to shaping individual thought to the extent that they unquestioningly or “instinctively” subject themselves to exploitation and servitude.

In *Billy Budd*, the act of questioning the commands of one’s superior on the *Bellipotent* is considered mutinous, leaving characters with few state-sanctioned options when oppressive and inhumane circumstances provoke their opposition. The narrator explicitly states earlier in chapter three that the “Great Mutiny...was indeed a demonstration more menacing to England than the

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<sup>5</sup> Noone, Jr., John B. “*Billy Budd*: Two Concepts of Nature.” *American Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Nov. 1957): 249-262.

contemporary manifestoes and conquering and proselyting armies of the French Directory” (*BB* 439). Political structures have more to fear from internal dissension than external dangers according to the text. If problems arise from the unfair treatment of citizens, in this case impressed and regular sailors, not only the consequences must be considered, the text implies, but also the causes leading to mutinous behavior must be addressed. “Discontent foreran the two mutinies” (*BB* 443), according to the narrator but still, “not every grievance was redressed” (*BB* 443). For instance, while certain unfair practices were outlawed, such as providing “shoddy cloth, rations not sound, or false in the measure; not the less impressments went on. By custom sanctioned for centuries” (*BB* 443). Here readers are confronted again with the fact that not only the law, but “custom” allows for infractions like these to persist, to the detriment of those in the lower ranks of society. In order for the political structure to survive “that mode of manning the fleet [i.e. impressment]...was not practicable to give up in those years” (*BB* 443).<sup>6</sup> What this means is that rather than “cripple the indispensable fleet” (*BB* 443) so necessary to maintain England’s dominance in the seas, and before advancements in technology eliminated this necessity, the unjust and immoral practice of impressments must continue since manual labor is essential for the orderly functioning of the ship. Moral justice again succumbs to the state’s need to preserve power, ostensibly to ensure the stability and security of the nation. The way men are impressed in the novella, that is, without regard for their persons, families, or interests and planted into circumstances both repressive and exploitative, which then results in mutinous behavior and invokes a comparison to the material causes of the French Revolution. In this light, the Nore and Spithead mutinies bear resemblance to the revolutionary activities of the French in their eventual dismantling of monarchic control in favor of democratic ideals due to economic

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<sup>6</sup> For further reading see Westover, Jeff. “The Impressments of *Billy Budd*.”

discontent and oppressive government acts. In the age of revolutions to which *Billy Budd* belongs, both in terms of the novella's content and setting (eighteenth century) as well as the time period of its production (nineteenth century), the questions foremost on men's minds in the American and European scenes, and that dominate Melville's novella, are questions not only of the state's function and authority, but also those concerning individual rights.<sup>7</sup>

*Billy Budd*, it can be argued, calls into question whether what is legal aligns with what is moral in an attempt to subtly direct readers to confront their own ideas of justice and examine the source of these ideas. It also raises the question: why does Vere so strongly support the state against his own conscience? It also prompts the reader to reflect on whether his or her own ideas align with or oppose the state's logic, as represented by Vere in the text. The narrator observes that, "The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a *loyal* sea commander, inasmuch as he was not *authorized* to determine the matter on that *primitive* basis" (BB 480, emphasis mine). According to Vere, a loyal sea commander is one that does not follow the dictates of his own primitive instinct of right and wrong but rather is ruled by a consideration of what is best for the state or political structure he represents and from which his authority has been granted. Here, the ideals of duty, obligation to the state, loyalty, patriotism, are all invoked, notions that have been planted by the nationalism that state authorities engage in to ensure obedience, in collaboration with other state sanctioned institutions that inculcate conformity, such as the school system or religious institutions. Also, Vere's maintenance of position or social status depends on his ability to fulfill his duties to the state. Duty and adherence to the laws of the state therefore, according to Vere's logic, must take precedence over any other consideration. The text points out, "a true military officer is in one

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<sup>7</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*

particular like a true monk” with regard to “his vows of allegiance to martial duty” (*BB* 481). On a societal level this means that to participate in civil society citizens must adhere to its prescriptions rather than their own consciences. Participating in society means adhering to its edicts in all circumstances, according to Vere’s logic during his speech to his men, logic which readers have already been prepared to question since the beginning of the text. In essence, according to Vere, individual right sought to be subsumed under the state’s rights. Readers are prompted to inquire into this logic and determine for themselves whether they agree with it, since in their role as subjects under a political structure potentially advocating such a logic, their rights becomes negligible.

### **State Reason**

One of the most significant questions raised by the text is, why do men obey authority and continue to do so in the face of rampant exploitation and oppressive practices? The question is not just confined to why the common sailors obey, which is largely because of fear of punishment and propagation of ritualized or prescribed behavior, but why do the official representatives of the state, those who are better educated and in positions of power, continue to uphold unjust practices and laws, as in the case of impressments? What methods are used to ensure their loyalty? Vere, according to the text, possesses the ability to accurately estimate Billy’s character. He is conscious of Billy’s moral innocence, as evidenced by his reference to Billy in chapter nineteen of the text as “an angel of God” (*BB* 478), while Claggart represents Ananias, a member of the early Christian church who, as it is related in the Bible in the book of Acts, is struck dead for the sin of lying to God. Vere interprets Claggart’s death as “divine judgment” (*BB* 478) on Claggart for falsely accusing Billy of mutiny. He thus appears to

understand the higher law injustice he is propagating but persists in adhering to his patriotic duty despite his own inner conflict. The text compares Vere to Abraham in his mental anguish over the decision:

The austere devotee of military duty, letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in the end have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham might have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest.

(*BB* 490)

Vere is obedient to the dictates of the all-powerful state, as the above description implies in its comparison of the state to God, a state which authorizes him to act in its defense and preservation. Like Abraham, Vere has faith in the state (or its equivalent) as protection against chaos, represented by France and the mutinous ships. He fears instability, and as noted before, “his settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise” (*BB* 446) which seemed “at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind” (*BB* 447). Political instability is the evil that Vere fears most according to the text. In a way, he is defending what is merely customary or habitual. Innovations and new modes of thinking are suspicious and to be eliminated for the preservation of the status quo, the text here implies. The instability of the ship mirrors the general instability of the time and prompts readers to consider whether change for the better can occur without revolutionary action. Measures were after all taken after the mutinies to alleviate some of the injustices prevalent in the navy, which might have been allowed to persist otherwise, possibly suggesting that reform or change can only occur after the violence of revolution. Alternatively, Billy’s avowal in his defense in chapter twenty-one—“Could I have used my tongue I would not have



struck him” (*BB* 482)—offers another route to peace. It insinuates that if men are able to dispassionately articulate their concerns, violence might not be a necessary accompaniment to change. The text leaves it open for readers to critically consider through what methods change can be achieved.

Through Billy’s defense and Captain Vere’s rhetoric, the text demonstrates how speech can be used to both represent and defend oneself, as well as to manipulate others into conformity. After the trial, the officer of the marines contends that, “surely Budd proposed neither mutiny nor homicide?” while the sailing master asks, “Can we not convict and yet mitigate the penalty?” (*BB* 487). To justify his defense of what his officers perceive to be an unjust judgment on his part, Vere exploits their fears stating that, “while thus strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary – the enemy may be sighted and an engagement result” (*BB* 487). In this way he uses language to create a sense of urgency so that his men must act quickly or suffer the supposed consequences of delay. He represents to the court only one possible outcome of their lenience, thus limiting their choices along with their ability to choose, given that he outranks them and so can simply overrule their objections:

[C]onsider the consequences of such clemency. The people...long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate...your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous...how deadly to discipline.  
(*BB* 488)

Vere’s logic that Billy must be sacrificed for a greater good, underscores the manner in which authority figures can reason falsely under the illusion that they act for the interests of the majority by taking away the majority’s ability to judge and act for themselves. The question

readers are encouraged to ask is, are these circumstances, or any circumstances in fact, sufficient to permit injustice to the individual in any capacity? Must the individual be sacrificed for the majority? Is that the only choice available? Vere again defends his judgment by disclaiming personal responsibility:

Would it be so much ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it. (*BB* 486)

Vere disavows autonomy in his judgment and describes himself as merely the executer of a legal system he is not responsible for establishing. This begs the question, who is or should be responsible for these laws? A few men in power or the many individuals that are affected daily by those laws? The question of individual rights within a political structure then becomes of central importance. Are subjects, like Vere, to accept the law as it is or should they strive to change what is unjust in these laws utilizing whatever measures are necessary, be it reform or revolution? Who in fact does the text show benefits the most under the law, the few or the many? These questions serve to shake the ready acceptance of the seemingly conservative stance the novella is said to take by some critics. Wendell Glick, for instance, in his article, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in *Billy Budd*," claims that Melville

appreciated with the Captain the stark injustice of a situation which finds the individual condemned for adherence to a standard most men would consider noble and right. But he agreed with the Captain that justice to the individual is not the ultimate loyalty in a complex culture; the stability of

the culture has a higher claim. And when the two conflict, justice to the individual must be abrogated to keep the order of society intact....The ultimate allegiance of the individual, in other words, is not to an absolute moral code, interpreted by his conscience and enlivened by his human sympathies, but to the utilitarian principle of social expediency. (104)

However, the evidence presented earlier in the text serves to negate his claims. In fact, the defense of Nelson against the “Benthamites of war” and “martial utilitarians” by the narrator in chapter four, along with the narrator’s sympathetic portrayal of Billy, contradicts that idea. Billy and Nelson’s depiction as heroes with larger than life personalities, which distinguishes them above the average masses, suggest instead that the text is anti-utilitarian and sympathizes with the exceptional individual.<sup>8</sup> In his portrayal both as a Christ-like figure and Adam before the fall, along with the singular circumstances of his hanging, Billy is rendered almost sacred and it can be argued, so are his rights by extension, rights which have been thus violated by the state.

### **A Foucauldian Analysis of State Reason**

What *Billy Budd*, and in particular Vere’s rationale during Billy’s trial, ultimately urges readers to consider is, to what extent does the power structure in place, through its practices and ideologies which are disseminated through various state sanctioned institutions and representatives, manipulate the ideals and values of the population? The story demonstrates that the arena of governance is not a separate isolated force in one’s life but, rather, is integral to the way in which one’s ideas, feelings, reasoning, and perceptions are disciplined, thus the political

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<sup>8</sup> The utilitarian doctrine proposes that no action is right unless it is likely to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals. The rights of the group therefore take precedence over those of the individual. For further reading see John Plamenatz’s book *The English Utilitarians*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1958.

structure influences almost every aspect of our lives. In support of this conception of the exercise of state influence and authority, Foucault asserts that

The population now represents more the end of government than the power of the sovereign; the population is the subject of needs, of aspirations, but it is also the object in the hands of the government....Interest at the level of consciousness of each individual who goes to make up the population, and interest considered as the interest of population regardless of what the particular interests and aspirations may be of the individuals who compose it, this is the new target and the fundamental instrument of the government of population. (*The Foucault Effect*, 100)

Similar to Foucault's theorization of governmentality, *Billy Budd* demonstrates that multiple forces act on the subject to control or govern individual conduct in society. The novella also represents a form of state reason that argues that the welfare of the population as a whole is of primary concern, but with the understanding that what benefits the many also benefits the individuals that comprise the many and vice versa. Overseeing the conduct of the population, consequently the conduct of the individual, then becomes a primary objective of government, according to Foucault, and so manifests laws, rules and regulations, norms of behavior, ethics, and moral dictates that seek to guide individual thought to ends advantageous to the political structure, which in turn ideally works for the individual's benefit. The state, along with its instruments and associated institutions, is powerful and can use various means to manipulate men into believing that it acts in the public's benefit rather than its own benefit through some of the strategies highlighted in *Billy Budd*. While moving away from violence, other more

subversive forms of control can arise to threaten the freedom of thought of subjects under the state's power. Behavior through cultural, religious, social norms can become codified in various ways, deviance from which can lead to different outcomes, including social ostracism, imprisonment, depending on the extent of the deviant behavior. Like Vere's use of rhetoric to influence his men, thus can the state utilize propaganda to proliferate ideas beneficial to state authority, embodied both in persons and institutions. In *Foucault and Political Reason*, Mitchell Dean writes:

Rather than appearing as the prerogative of the sovereign State, concerns about conduct are voiced and pursued by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies that seek to unify, divide, make whole and fragment our lives in the name of specific forms of truth. To understand the relation between authority and identity, we should look beyond the global enwrapping of State formation and the moral regulation of individuals to the variegated domain in which what might be called "regimes of government" come to work through "regimes of conduct," a domain populated by the multiform projects, programmes and plans that attempt to make a difference to the way in which we live. (211)

In the novella, Vere, in his capacity as state representative, rationalizes a particular mode of conduct to his subordinates, adding the weight of laws for which he emphasizes he is not responsible and invoking their sense of duty as patriots, a duty inculcated since childhood in most cases, in an attempt to manipulate the men to his point of view. The formalities that Vere relies upon, the stratagems he utilizes to ensure discipline and order, the manipulation of his men's ideas, are all tactics the state employs through "a multiplicity of authorities" as Dean

asserts, with the objective of ultimately controlling individual conduct. The novella thus is a space in which Melville critically explores the beginnings of the transition from a sovereign state, reliant on fear, violence, and laws, to a more modern form of government where control is achieved not solely through laws and brute force, but also through subtle techniques and tactics utilized by multiple state-sanctioned institutions. Behavior becomes codified or normalized through rituals, moral prescriptions by institutions such as churches and schools, and agents of the state who, like Vere, interpret the law in accordance with the state's views. Melville's text aptly demonstrates the claims of Foucault in "Governmentality" when he states,

with sovereignty the instrument that allowed it to achieve its aim – that is to say, obedience to the laws – was the law itself; law and sovereignty were inseparable. On the contrary, with government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics. (95)

As evident in the text, Vere uses legal rhetoric as one of many tactics to overcome his men's pangs of conscience, affirming, "But for us here, acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with" (*BB* 486).

Melville's novella exemplifies the shift from a form of state reason that is completely dependent on the brute enforcement of laws to maintain power to one that utilizes multiple strategies, techniques, and language to mold individual thoughts. The new form of governance manipulates its representatives and subjects in various ways, for instance through enforcing normative behavior, to expose the many ways in which a citizen's thoughts and actions can be manipulated by the state. The novella thus underlines the subtle ways in which societal expectations, norms, and codes of behavior aboard the ship, itself an allegory of the state, play a

central role in identity formation and thus individual conduct. It is significant that Billy is presented as almost outside of the influence of societal prescriptions. The text alleges that it is because of the innate innocence of his nature as well as his lack of knowledge of society, having lived as a sailor most of his life. One of the notable conflicts within Billy is his desire to show his allegiance to the state, represented by the ship's authority figures such as Vere, while also remaining loyal to his fellow shipmates. For instance, when questioned during his trial if he knew of any mutinous intent amongst his shipmates, the narrator reveals that:

an innate repugnance to playing a part at all approaching that of an informer against one's own shipmates – the same erring sense of *uninstructed* honor which had stood in the way of his reporting the matter at the time, though as a *loyal* man-of-war's man it was incumbent on him, and failure to do so, if charged against him and proven, would have subjected him to the heaviest of penalties; this... prevailed with him.

When the answer came it was a negative. (*BB* 483, my emphasis)

Though Billy is aware of the penalties of lying, he honorably follows his own moral code. As such he is presented as a chaotic element in a well-ordered and obedient society, an element that readers can then infer must thus be destroyed for the preservation of the status quo. The use of the word “uninstructed” to describe Billy's sense of honor underscores the fact that his moral compass remains outside the realm of state reason, the epitome of which is personified in Captain Vere. Throughout the story Billy is constantly associated with nature, the narrator describing him as “a rustic beauty” (*BB* 436), “a dog of Saint Bernard's breed” (*BB* 437), an “upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the *urbane* Serpent wriggled itself into his company” (*BB* 438, my emphasis). Due to his natural innocence,

which he was able to retain through minimal participation in civil society, Billy's sense of justice remains uncorrupted. His downfall, the text implies, is largely due to this innocence and ignorance of evil, which prevents him from discovering Claggart's true nature, as well as his ignorance of societal norms and expectations, the duplicitousness of which his simple nature cannot comprehend. Men associated with civil society, in contrast to Billy whose experience has largely been at sea, men such as Claggart and Vere, are portrayed thus negatively within the text. This is emphasized in chapter two where the narrator compares sailors to landsmen (i.e. civilians):

less often than with landsmen do their [sailors] vices, so called, partake of crookedness of heart, seeming less to proceed from viciousness than exuberance of vitality after long constraint: frank manifestations in accordance with natural law [Continuing]...the man thoroughly civilized, even in a fair specimen of the breed, has to the same moral palate a questionable smack, as of compounded wine. (BB 438)

The narrator's negative portrayal of *civilized* man, whose morals become questionable merely by participating in society, and defense of the sailors' "unsophisticated" (BB 437) natures, suggests that what is natural in man, his individuality, is more valuable and pure, therefore, should take precedence when opposed to the rules and prescriptions of civil society, which upholds repressive laws, promotes questionable values and customs, and demands absolute obedience, whether one's conscience agrees or not. Vere similarly reflects this idea of repressing one's conscience to conform with societal needs when he expresses to the court, "For the compassion, how can I otherwise than share it? But, mindful of paramount obligations, I strive against



scruples that may tend to enervate decision” (*BB* 486). The story thus posits the question; must what is pure and innocent in man be sacrificed in order to participate in society?

The novella not only explores how the ruling power structure evolves in its practices and makes use of diverse institutions to achieve its ends, but also explores how leadership techniques and manipulation through rhetoric and demagoguery evolve, particularly during periods of political instability. Captain Vere exemplifies these ideas in his use of the law, as well as language, and strategic commands to support his rationale and to achieve his desired goal. Vere’s manipulation of language and his interpretation of the law are particularly remarkable in chapter twenty-one. His manner of speech and arguments, addressed to the drumhead court, go through various shifts in his defense of his decision to hang Billy. For example, in one instance he appears to sympathize with his officers’ views but then immediately after uses religion to deflect responsibility:

The soldier once more spoke, in a tone of suggestive dubiety....‘Nobody is present – none of the ship’s company, I mean – who might shed lateral light, if any is to be had, upon what remains mysterious in this matter.’

‘That is thoughtfully put,’ said Captain Vere; ‘I see your drift. Ay, there is a mystery; but, to use a scriptural phrase, it is a ‘mystery of iniquity,’ a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss. But what has a military court to do with it?...The prisoner’s deed – with that alone we have to do.’

(*BB* 484)

Vere distinguishes between metaphysical and secular, juridical concerns. His jurisdiction, he asserts, lies in the realm of society, the actual, where the results of one’s actions, not the intent, determine judgment. Vere’s distinction between these realms reflects Nikolas Rose’s concept of

the “heterogeneity of authorities that have sought to govern conduct” (21). Rose claims that, “To govern...is to be condemned to seek an authority for one’s authority” (28). Vere, in the narrative, is attempting to justify his authority to condemn Billy. He is authorized, according to his argument, to act in his official position as commander of the ship, on behalf of the law, an instrument of the state, differentiated from the realm of religion, another system of control utilized by the state, though ostensibly acting on behalf of a higher power. Rose continues in his chapter titled, “Governing,” that,

[t]he government of a population...becomes possible only through discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics, and whose component parts are linked together in some more or less systematic manner by forces, attractions, and coexistences. (33)

Vere claims that he can only act in accordance with man-made or positive laws, which cannot condone lenience in Billy’s sentence without detrimental implications for the stability of the ship, and consequently, the state. In effect, Vere defends his authority by delineating a specific area in which he is authorized to act, thus creating an isolated space in which other considerations—moral and ethical—are ruled irrelevant to the reason of state.

Captain Vere’s justification for the hanging of Billy Budd makes it clear that his allegiance is to the tenets of the law, therefore the state, over that of his own conscience, implying that what is lawful and what is morally right are not necessarily aligned. While Vere’s choice is to follow the law, readers are prompted to consider the rationale behind their own moral choices. The question arises, to what extent should our moral and physical freedom be sacrificed for stability and security? Also, is the argument propounded by Captain Vere

specious? In the narrative Vere urges his men to a hasty decision, reasoning, “while thus strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary – the enemy may be sighted and an engagement result” (*BB* 487). He contends that this threat of physical danger from both outside forces (French frigate) and from within (mutiny) must necessarily outweigh moral considerations. Even religion, the moral authority of the state, submits within the narrative to the dictates of the state’s military representative, represented in the person of the chaplain who also does not dare to question the rule of the state. The preservation of the hierarchy, symbolic of stability on the ship, is prioritized over moral justice, which must be sacrificed to maintain the status quo. The consequence of Billy’s act therefore is more significant in the present instance than the justness of it. Vere claims that, “If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence” (*BB* 486). He stresses that their allegiance is to the state, not to their natural instincts that might be at variance with the state’s ruling. When his appeal to the men’s loyalty appears insufficient he shifts gears: “Perceiving [this], the speaker [Vere] paused for a moment; then abruptly changing his tone, went on. ‘To steady us a bit, let us recur to the facts’” (*BB*487). Vere adapts his arguments according to his men’s responses, which demonstrates how manipulation can be used in governing. When his argument centering on logic fails, Vere then appeals to his subordinates’ fear and pride, shifting his appeal from their reason to their emotions:

“[C]onsider the consequences of such clemency. The people (meaning the ship’s company) have native sense; most of them are familiar with our naval usage and tradition; and how would they take it? Even if you could explain it to them – which our official position forbids – they, long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that

might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate....*Why?* they will  
 ruminate....They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of  
 them...how deadly to discipline. You see then, whither, prompted by duty  
 and the law, I steadfastly drive.” (BB 488)

There are several significant ideas expressed in this quotation: the maintenance of duty and tradition as a way of controlling the sailors, the arbitrariness of discipline, which is meant to ensure obedience, the secrecy inherent to governing, and the fear that once men take the time to “ruminate” on their circumstances they might recognize their potential to stimulate change.

Vere’s argument suggests that the law’s purpose is to ensure obedience in order to uphold the status quo consequently maintaining the stability of society, which ensures the continued security of its citizens. The general population, who is meant to accept state logic uncritically, must be conditioned to do so through customs, traditions, rituals, and the enforcement of normative behavior. As state representative, Vere voices the state’s fear of criticism from citizens, which can potentially lead to rebellion, as in the case of the Spithead and Nore mutinies. He suggests that any sign of weakness in the state’s power could jeopardize its continued rule. Vere implies that in order for state authorities to maintain power, citizens must be practically automatons, following rules and laws instinctively and unquestioningly accepting state authority regardless of their own individual, possibly oppositional, stance. His fears reflect the fears of governments, whose citizens, under the right conditions, have the power to rise up against the ruling authority and assert their rights. In the age of mutinies and revolutions that threaten the established order and hierarchy of the ship, and of the country at large, the novella explores the rationale of a political structure with tenuous control, held together through the use of fear and violence,

implying that, in an age of technological, political, social, and scientific progress, it cannot long survive.

Vere's portrayal, along with the various other minor characters depicted in the novella, can be used to demonstrate Foucault's idea that the state's self-conscious disciplining of its subjects' individual thoughts and actions is a signal feature of the emergence of governmentality. The text illustrates how this new rationale of government analyzes power relations within a political structure and also shows how the various practices and state-sanctioned institutions and representatives act in subtle and overt ways to influence the conduct of the members of the population to align with the state's agenda. Nikolas Rose elaborates on this idea when he states that: "To analyse political power through the analytics of governmentality...is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques" (20). Foucault himself defines government

as a right manner of disposing things so as to lead not to the form of the common good...but to an end which is 'convenient' for each of the things that are to be governed. This implies a plurality of specific aims: for instance, government will have to ensure that the greatest possible quantity of wealth is produced, that the people are provided with sufficient means of subsistence, that the population is enabled to multiply, etc. There is a whole series of specific finalities then, which become the objective of government as such...with government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics—to arrange

things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved. (*The Foucault Effect*, 95)

Vere's reasoning throughout the text is notably to maintain stability and order for the 'greater good' that is, the preservation of the state, which would be the "convenient" end Foucault discusses. For this end to be achieved, the individual's needs are subsumed to ensure the survival of the state, a belief that Vere frequently advocates. Vere's choice of reading materials, the text points out, serves to reinforce these beliefs. For example, in chapter seven, the narrator notes that, "[Vere] had a marked leaning toward everything intellectual. He loved books" (BB 446) and therein "found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts" (BB 446). Education, in this way, can be understood as one of the many "regimes of conduct" (211) Mitchell Dean refers to in his book. It reaffirms Vere's reasoning, reasoning that reflects an aristocratic background, a class which has its own specific code of conduct and supports state reasoning. In his lectures, Foucault posits that, "the state is governed according to rational principles which are intrinsic to it and which cannot be derived solely from natural or divine laws or the principles of wisdom and prudence; the state, like nature, has its own proper form of rationality" (*The Foucault Effect*, 97). He further notes that, "the art of government...must find the principles of its rationality in that which constitutes the specific reality of the state" (*The Foucault Effect*, 97). Vere's conception of the state, it can be inferred from his logic in the narrative, is of an enduring institution that advocates specific values, such as obedience, conformity, and loyalty and which, though imperfect in certain ways, must be preserved for the sake of the enduring peace and security of its citizens. If inhibiting individual freedom and the practice of deception is sometimes necessary to achieve its objectives, it is a price Vere is willing to pay in fulfillment of his duty as an officer of the King. This idea is the driving force behind his actions and in his

unswerving allegiance to state laws and customs. His inability to adapt to changing circumstances and his resistance to “those invading waters of novel opinion, social, political, and otherwise” (*BB* 446) reflects the conservatism of an old system being challenged by new, progressive ideals and values, values that redefine the worth of the individual and his rights within a social construct.

An analysis of *Billy Budd* through a Foucauldian lens thus deepens our understanding and awareness of both the forces that determine an individual’s conduct and choices within a complex political system, as well as the practices that emerge during the transition from an older system of direct control to a new system that manipulates individuals in order to maintain power through less violent and more subtle methods. Under this mentality, revised conceptions of what is just, what values should be upheld, what rights a citizen should have under a governing power, point to a government that focuses on individual needs rather than the maintenance of existing power structures. What should be understood, however, is that though the rationale may have apparently changed, this does not mean that governments no longer seek to control the population or to retain power through expressions of direct control or coercion. It simply means that, in modern political systems, authority is no longer solidified and it can no longer hide behind official policies, institutions such as the law, or religion, to ensure obedience. As a result, the population must instead be persuaded to align its desires with the aim of government, a feat that can be achieved through the use of a multitude of different tactics and strategies, and which is upheld by a rationale that sufficiently mirrors the expressed concerns of its subjects to ensure its cooperation. Alongside the evolving needs of society and its changing objectives, and with the rise of globalization, environmental concerns, technological advances, etc., this rationale also evolves, so that the justifications of government, at least according to Foucault’s analysis, is

constantly in flux. Moments of transition, as exemplified in *Billy Budd*, are integral in tracing this interaction between old and new rationales emerging within a system.

By utilizing the ideas discussed in Foucault's lectures on governmentality to analyze Melville's text, we can evaluate not only how the events within the text demonstrate these evolving ideas and practices of a political structure during a period of transition on one level, but on another level, we can evaluate how literature itself can be used as a tool to disseminate either potentially radical or conservative ideals to the public in an effort to direct thought and consequently conduct. Melville is a product of his time, a period of revolutions and political instability, and as such, his own influences can be gleaned from the choices made within the story. My interpretation of the evidence presented in the text, according to my earlier arguments, points to the narrative as a subtle critique of the devices of control used upon subjects to fulfill the objectives of state authority during a period of exception, or instability. The text prompts one to ask how exactly power relations function in a society and to question the nature of said authority. How does the government justify and rationalize its power in such a way as to ensure that citizens, not only remain obedient, but also willingly privilege societal needs over their own? An examination of *Billy Budd*, a story that pits the individual's rights against the needs of the state, serves to illuminate these relations on a smaller scale, when the connections amongst various systems of control were just emerging during the eighteenth century, and were thus somewhat easier to trace. An examination of these relations involves assuming a critical attitude towards the ideals expressed in the text as well as towards the ideologies perpetuated by political systems in general. Nikolas Rose defines such an attitude as "Perspectivism," which, he elaborates, "is...partly a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given in our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable; to stand against



the maxims of one's time, against the spirit of one's age, against the current of received wisdom" (20). *Billy Budd* appears to attempt to provoke a similar critical reaction in its readership by raising questions about accepted norms, particularly with regard to the relationship between the ruling power, the tactics and strategies used by its agents, as well as its practices, and the consequences of these practices, on its citizens.

The novella in this way raises awareness of, and thus creates doubts about, what constitutes justice in society. It delineates how this societal concept of what is just is linked to our own ideas of moral rectitude and civil responsibility. In employing Rose's notion of perspectivism, we can achieve an understanding of how governments function, through what practices, and upheld by which institutions, and in this way, we can identify and potentially rectify the propagation of unjust practices. The text can be said to illuminate for readers the many ways in which these forces work to influence individual thought and govern individual conduct, and this awareness can consequently lead to the elimination or improvement of what is corrupt in the system. Rose also states that:

Far from unifying all under a general theory of government, studies undertaken from this perspective draw attention to the complex and contingent histories of the problems around which political problematizations come to form – cholera epidemics, wars, riots, technological change, the rise of economic powers and so forth. (21)

*Billy Budd* demonstrates how “political problematizations” come to play in the emerging power relations during that particular period of upheaval.

## Conclusion

One of the central questions *Billy Budd* poses is: what is the ultimate objective of government and what role does the individual subject play within a government? A close examination of the novella demonstrates the answer to this question through the portrayal of the particular rule of one captain aboard a warship during a period of social and political upheaval. The government of the ship mirrors the manner in which the state governs its subjects and, through a close analysis of the rationale and conduct of Captain Vere, we can explore how control of the population is achieved and sustained in society. The multiplicity of means and methods through which governments ensure obedience and loyalty from their subjects are thus illuminated to invite social awareness, and potentially, political action in the novella.

The narrative uses Captain Vere as the focal point for a study of how individual conduct is affected by state reason and for what ends. It appears to critique Captain Vere in his role as leader and enforcer of state logic through various means in the text: by an unfavorable comparison of his leadership with a captain of greater fame, Nelson, well-known for his heroism in battle, and crowned by a glorious death; by undermining Vere's authority through the narrator's overt criticism of his methods of achieving control, such as secrecy and deception; by depicting his paternalistic attitude towards his officers, general lack of awareness and empathy; and through the rationale he uses to justify his decision to hang Billy in court, a rationale his own officers question. Through these means the novella suggests that there are complex forces at play that determine conduct and ensure the obedience and loyalty of subjects within a politicized space. Not least among these are customs, rituals, and the enforcement of normative behaviors, along with institutions that support the logic of the state, such as legal, religious, pedagogic, and medical institutions.

Based on the various representational choices Melville makes in the novella, it seems evident that the aim of *Billy Budd* is not to support any particular political view, but to instead provoke a critical attitude in readers towards the expressed and unexpressed rationale of governments in general, and of their overt and subtle methods of control to ensure continued power. The novella renders questionable the accepted legal and social mores of the socio-political world we inhabit as subjects and appears to argue against the unquestioning loyalty that the state logic, voiced through Vere, demands for stability and security. That is, it undermines Captain Vere's rationale, alluding to a rejection of state rationale that governs the conduct of individuals in society.

The novella urges readers to critically assess the very foundation of their belief system, along with the justness of the decrees and practices of the ruling power structure. Such a critical attitude would appear not only to act as a defense of one's individual rights, which might otherwise be abrogated under the guise of specious arguments like Vere's, but would also act as an ongoing means of achieving a critical understanding of how one's conception of the self, that is, one's social, political, and moral identity, and resulting practices are shaped and directed by said structure. The novella implicitly suggests that only when individuals become conscious of the forces that work in collusion to shape their ideas and control their conduct can they hope to achieve positive change and live authentic lives in harmony with nature, rather than suffer from moral and ethical conflicts produced by the demands of a repressive social regime.

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