

A Conflict between Corruption and Innocence: a Critical Study of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*

Anju Karaktan

Assistant Professor, Dayanand Girls P.G College, Kanpur
E-mail: anjukaraktan@gmail.com

Abstract—Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* is a classic tale of innocence and evil. The novella is considered as an extremely a distributive text of discord and disagreement. The text is focuses on the dichotomy of acceptance versus resistance. On the one hand the story is about accepting the slaughter of Billy Budd as the necessary ends of justice and on the other hand it is about Melvillian doctrine of resistance. In the story the power of innocence is incessantly attacked by the power of evil until the innocence staggers. The character Billy Budd is represented here as a person whose innocence cannot be converted into disgust even in living with ill mannered people. He does not represent goodness so much as he does innocence and the conflict between innocence and corruption is different from the conflict between good and evil. *Billy Budd, Sailor* is about the corruption of innocence by society. The present paper proposes how corruption leads to the destruction of one's innocence and even in innocence how corruption looms over Billy. The paper further explores the constant battle and struggle between corruption and innocence and how an innocent person is condemned and is sentenced to death for a crime he does but with an innocent motive.

Introduction

Herman Melville was one of the shiniest stars in the firmament of American Renaissance Period. He is basically known for his genres i.e. travelogue, captivity narrative, nautical fiction, gothic romanticism, allegory and tall tale. Most of the works of Herman Melville are related to his own personal experiences. Among them "*Billy Budd, Sailor*" is one based on his personal experiences as a sailor. Melville wrote under the influence of the privations of sea life. He wrote the novel with a sense of romance and adventure but at the same time exposed the perils and diligence of naval life. Because of the distressing experience of the ship-board life Melville could not escape himself from its impact for the whole course of his life. The feeling of futility and terror, the moral degradation born out of his life provided material for the majority of his works. His novels are the best examples of the dark realities of sea life. The present paper aims how corruption by the society of *H.M.S Indomitable* leads to the destruction of one's innocence and even in innocence how corruption looms over Billy and also explores the constant battle and struggle between corruption and innocence and how an innocent person is condemned and is sentenced to death for a crime he does but with an innocent motive.

One of the most widely recognized themes in *Billy Budd, Sailor* is a conflict between corruption and Innocence. A conflict is a serious disagreement or argument which gives the elements of amusement and mystery in any form of literature whether it is a drama, a fiction or a short story. At least one of the opposing forces is generally a person. This person may involve in different sorts of conflicts i.e. man versus man, man versus society in which he struggles against social traditions, customs or rules as a force, and man versus self.

The conflict between corruption and innocence in the novella is alike the conflict between evil and good. Corruption of an innocent character i.e. Billy is being done by the society. In the novella society is represented by an eighteenth century English man-of-war, the H.M.S Indomitable. Billy who represents innocence is a young seaman who is endowed with physical strength, beauty and good nature (Voss 44). "His simple nature remained unsophisticated by those moral obliquities which are not in every case incompatible with that manufacturable thing known as respectability. But are sailors, frequenters of fiddlers' greens, without vices" (Melville p.16). A crew member aboard the merchant ship Rights of Man, he is impressed by the English navy and is taken aboard the H.M.S. *Indomitable*.

In the Novella, Hermann Melville, creates two conflicting personalities portrayed as bad and good. John Claggart who is Master-At-Arms tries to ravage Billy because he is envious of Billy's position and acceptance among the crew. There is also a conflict involving Captain Vere when he is forced to decide on the fate of Billy after killing Claggart. Billy is a handsome young sailor who is new to the ship and eager to impress. Billy got very popular among the crew. Claggart starts getting envious when he comes to know that Billy is being liked by the members of the crew. Claggart is a man "in whom was the mania of evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short depravity according to nature." (Pardhan p.42)

The summit of Claggart's corruption comes in the novella with Claggart's wrong charge upon Billy for being the leader of a mutinous group. He condemns Billy of spreading mutiny among the sailors. Billy gets out of control after hearing this

and kills Claggart. But the conflict does not reach to an end. This creates another conflict between good and bad that is between innocent man and society. Though his inclination was not the slaughter of the bad man but in the eyes of men Billy is guilty of this atrocious crime. When captain Vere asks him the reason of this heinous act, he says, "There was no malice between us...I am sorry that he is dead. I did not mean to kill him" (Pradhan p.39).

Billy's hit was not rational but an act of without any thought of consequence. He is innocent in what he is not in what he has done. Captain Vere, behaves as a father with Billy but after that incident he orders for Billy's hanging in order to keep the social rules secure. Though Vere knows the resentment of the military rules, but he has to go along with it. He thinks of the justice which is appropriate in society. The officers' responsibility is to follow it and administers it. Human rules and the rules of nature are different. Human rules are based on man's action. Vere says it is practical, "It is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with" (Pradhan.p.59). In human law necessity of the action is not the fact which is taken into consideration. What is considered is what has happened. Thus Vere suggests the call of the nature and gives his practical judgment. Reich says, "To preserve one's life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be Plaines and highest duty to sacrifice it." (Reich.p.371)

Before the evil social law Captain Vere suffers from an inner conflict. He knows very well the necessity of taking decision. An upright and firm disciplinarian like him has no other choice. The circumstances do not allow any compromise especially to the discipline which is significant in the armed forces. Vere feels that military law and rules must be upheld at any cost. Society creates despotic rules to make it fundamentally strong. Social system is responsible to produce evil at the very extent. Though, the sin is not very serious but the social laws insist man to face various difficulties which born such more kinds of corruption on the large scale. The social habits and behavior prove harmful to the world. The more cruel rules and laws are made the more cruel evils or corruptions are born. The rich and the poor; the higher and the lower, the sinner and innocent, the good and bad come into the sphere of the corruption. Corruption does not know the discrepancy between right and wrong. In this situation human beings often find themselves. One cannot get of such situation. An innocent man is thus doomed creature. One way or another, an innocent man finds it obligatory to perform certain actions which he simply cannot avoid. "Human nature is a mixture of the shame and the true, of kindness and cruelty, of meanness and generosity, of good and evil" (West.p.127).

This is perfectly represented in the main character's action; their conflicts, their quarrels, their struggles and how they progress in the play. Captain Vere represents goodness with a strong admixture not of evil exactly but of an excessive preoccupation with law, rules and duty, a preoccupation so excessive which seems to be almost evil. Claggart and Billy

represent the two extremes, goodness and corrupt and the novel tells the story of their actions and interactions. Billy's hanging reminds of the crucifixion. Billy, at his end appears to be a Christ figure. He sacrifices his life in the interest of the large innocence. Melville believes at the end that though innocence goes to defeat and death but its radiance redeems life. Billy becomes a martyr among sailors.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the novella Melville shows Billy as an innocent man but at the end Billy strikes Claggart down and destroys the corruption done by him. Billy being an innocent guy has done no wrong which leads to his blind and naïve view of evil. The Dankster tries to warn Billy that no one is his kith and kin but he does not see Claggart to be a threat of any kind. Billy's innocence and devotion to good do not let him see the corruption by the evil one i.e. Claggart who is trying to destroy Billy but eventually conflict resulting in the murder of Claggart from a hit by Billy. Billy's vengeance leads to another conflict between good and bad where Captain Vere has to decide Billy's fate after he commits a crime punishable by death. Vere doesn't want Billy put to death. Vere accepts that Claggart provoked Billy's vengeance by lying and can see the bad one in Claggart but also recognizes the call of duty which at war-time is non-tolerable for such an offence. Vere is troubled with the conflict of inner soul and duty and under the circumstances of war he does what is right and has Billy hung. Captain Vere loves Billy and has got no problem with him in any way but finds where authority has evil it will command. In conclusion Billy was innocent but by failing to see the corruption of the society.

References

- [1]. Melville, Herman., "Billy Budd Sailor", ed. Narindar S. Pradhan. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.p.41.
- [2]. Charles A. Reich, The Tragedy of Justice in Billy Budd, Yale Review, 56 (1969), p.372.
- [3]. Melville, Herman. Billy Budd Sailor, ed. Narindar S. Pradhan. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.p.59.
- [4]. Charles A. Reich, The Tragedy of Justice in Billy Budd, Yale Review, 56 (1969), p.371.
- [5]. West, Ray B., *The Unity of Billy Budd*. Hudson Review. 1952. P.127.
- [6]. Miller, James. E., A reader's guide to Herman Melville, London: Thames and Hudson Publication, 1962.p.219.