

## Good and Evil in Cold War: When Will the Pawns Cease to Suffer?

If a man lives a life of virtue, he will go to Heaven when he dies. If a man lives a life of sin, he will be sent to the fiery pits of Hell. Good and evil, universal opposing forces since the dawn of time, are a major theme of many philosophies and most existing religions. Billy Budd by Herman Melville shows the continuous struggle between good and evil in mankind.

Each of the three main characters of the story, Billy Budd, Captain Vere, and John Claggart represented good and evil in his own way. Billy Budd was portrayed as pure goodness; goodness that is rare, if not absent in the world. John Claggart symbolized evil, the natural enemy of good. Captain Vere, however, was a combination of good and evil, and therefore was in constant internal struggle.

Billy Budd could hardly be seen as a human. Rather, he was shown as a pure, innocent being. Captain Vere once even referred to him as an angel. "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"(p.60) Yet, Billy was so innocent that he could not understand Claggart's sarcasm after Billy spilled his soup. "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it too!"(p.34) Billy's unusual goodness blinded him from seeing his fellow sailors' darker motives. He had placed his trust in the goodness of humankind. But he soon found his trust misplaced, especially in the master-at-arms John Claggart.

John Claggart was a powerful man who had many followers. He took advantage of Billy's innocence in order to bring him down. Melville portrayed Claggart as evil, but, unlike Billy, he also seemed to be human. However, the natural evil in Claggart would forbid him any compatibility with Billy. "...as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban. But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of..."(p.48) His need to destroy Billy's purity and innocence made Claggart a very complex character.

But perhaps the most complex character in the story was Captain Vere. He was portrayed as a good person, yet his decisions were often made against his private conscience. His most difficult decision to allow Billy to be executed could be attributed to his extreme sense of duty. The captain felt that he needed to act against his feelings and sentence a good and innocent godsend to his death. In this case, Captain Vere's natural evil won the struggle against his goodness, impelling him to put Billy to death. Although many would argue that Vere's decision was made while bearing responsibility, it was the misinterpretation of the responsibility that was evil. Evil need not be the intentions of a person such as Claggart. Evil may also be housed in fear, misunderstanding, and ignorance.

Alien to this world full of evil, Billy still saw some goodness in Captain Vere. Billy's last words, "God bless Captain Vere!"(p.80) were hopeful that with God's blessing, Vere may be able to overcome his natural evil. Billy, and quite probably Melville, wished that good would someday triumph over evil. However, the story tells of Vere's untimely death and failure to fulfill Billy Budd's wishes.

Herman Melville, a "dissenter," believed that man was touched by evil and portrayed these ideas in Billy Budd. As opposed to the transcendentalist, Melville saw the good and pure as strangers to the world. Billy Budd's character, an orphan, clearly did not seem like a normal adult man. Instead, he was sent from Heaven to strike down a truly evil force, John Claggart. The struggle between the two characters was clearly the struggle between good and evil. But Captain Vere underwent an internal struggle between his good and evil sides. Vere, a man like any other, was naturally touched by evil. Eventually, evil won the struggle and led to the death of Billy Budd, the destruction of goodness and beauty. Throughout the entire story, good and evil were battling to gain domination, and in Melville's opinion, evil had won.

The tragedy of each man's struggle and fall in Billy Budd was a product of the ever battling forces of good and evil. Billy Budd's innocence was stripped away from him, leaving him bare and as piteous as the scarred face of an angel. Herman Melville's message to humanity is clear: that mankind, riddled with sin, would stop at nothing to crush everything good and sacred in this world.