SEMESTER VI

**PAPER 18 : Western Mythology: Introducing Classical & Judeo-Christian Myth**

**Section II: the Myth in Literature**

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BILLY BUDD

By HERMAN MELVILLE

* The novella was written towards the end of Melville’s life and the author died before could finish. It was published posthumously(after the death) in 1924.
* Billy is a sailor employed in a ship and is loved by everyone due to his beauty and friendly nature. Also the sea voyages(journeys) took a long time. Sailors had to become friendly and consider the other sailors as part of their own family in order to survive and have a good company.
* A lot of emphasis is put on Billy’s personal beauty as the author wanted to associate beauty with some kind of spiritual purity. (as if beautiful people were pure from heart)
* Claggart’s envy/jealousy for Billy’s beauty, popularity probably is because he is a homosexual and has some attraction towards Billy.
* Like all beauty though, Billy had one defect - his stutter.(খুনা ) When he is nervous/angry he stutters which becomes difficult while expressing his feelings/thoughts. Note that Billy’s stutter is what leads to his death as he is unable to argue with Claggart. Billy is therefore hanged due to his tragic fault. He is a tragic hero, as his fatal flaw(his stutter) leads to his death. In the later part of the novel, the focus shifts from Billy’s beauty to his image as a pure hero. When Vere first indicates Billy’s tragic fate, he calls Billy an angel.
* Billy’s innocence is the direct opposite of cruelty. Claggart is clearly the villain described as “naturally depraved”(wicked) He does uses his intelligence to make plans against Billy. It is even suggested that he is a madman and is obsessed with his plan to destroy Billy’s life. He is also compared to a snake.
* Captain Vere is associated with the forces of intellect. His name is derived from Latin ‘Veritas’ which means ‘truth’. Here never believed Claggart’s accusations against Billy. In fact, he calls Claggart to clear Billy’s name so that an unnecessary problem can be solved.after Claggart’s death, Vere calls it divine judgement on a liar. Vere later on in the novel while deciding/judging the fate of Billy gets more associated with the mind/intellect than with the heart. He would like to look through the eyes of justice than as a forgiving master. Therefore he cannot let Billy’s crime go unpunished as he has to set an example for the rest of the crew. Vere believes that Billy must be executed in order to maintain military order. He ignores military protocols and take matters in his own hand by punishing Billy himself. He knows that if he doesn’t then the other sailors not just in his ship but other ships also will get to know about Billy’s act(although Billy has not committed mutiny).
* Issues of social class/social instability are suggested throughout. The whole issue of mutiny is in the backdrop of the American and French Revolutions. The mutinies were seen as highly dangerous and which could lead to further disruptions. This kind of social uprising could destroy order in places if not controlled properly. The mutinies at seas were seen as symptom of these spreading. Vere sees this kind of liberty as unnecessary as it can’t be successfully used to oppose oppression.
* Melville sets Vere up as a crucial character - he trusts the mind over the heart making it very tragic. Here stands up for the law versus what is morally right. He sides with obedience to the rule of the law/kingdom rather than following his conscience/heart.
* Billy is presented as a Christ like figure, a figure of innocence that cannot exist in this cruel world. Billy is above religion. He is unafraid of death just like Christ. Melville is presenting the idea that civilisation actually corrupts humanity’s purer (and better) qualities.
* MAIN THEMES - Billy as a Christ-like figure

Theme of Justice: law and conscience

Billy, the tragic hero