



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DA PARAÍBA  
CENTRO DE CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS, LETRAS E ARTES  
DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS ESTRANGEIRAS MODERNAS  
CURSO DE LETRAS - INGLÊS

**AN ANALYSIS OF MORALITY IN *BILLY BUDD, SAILOR*, USING  
CONCEPTS OF NIETZSCHE**

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Orientador: Prof. Michael Harold Smith, Ph.D.

JOÃO PESSOA

2017

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Trabalho monográfico de conclusão de curso apresentado ao Curso de Licenciatura em Letras da Universidade Federal da Paraíba - UFPB, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Licenciado em Letras - Inglês.

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2017

Catálogo da Publicação na Fonte.

Universidade Federal da Paraíba.

Biblioteca Setorial do Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes (CCHLA).

Magliano, Raphael Queiroga.

An analysis of morality in Billy Budd, sailor, using concepts of Nietzsche. / Raphael Queiroga Magliano.- João Pessoa, 2017.

43f.:il.

Monografia (Graduação em Letras - Língua inglesa) – Universidade Federal da Paraíba - Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes.

Orientador: Prof.º Dr.º Michael Harold Smith

1. Billy Budd. 2. Moral. 3. Crítica literária. I. Melville, Herman. II.  
Título

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso aprovado como requisito para obtenção do grau de  
Licenciado no Curso de Letras-Inglês, da Universidade Federal da Paraíba.

Data de aprovação: 22/11/2017

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*There are no Moral Facts (Nietzsche)*

## **AGRADECIMENTOS**

A Mike e Dennis pela amizade, ajuda e correções, sem as quais este trabalho não existiria.

A Genilda Azerêdo e Sandra Luna por aceitarem participar da banca.

A meus pais por possibilitarem minha educação.

## RESUMO

O presente trabalho está situado nas áreas de Literatura e Filosofia. Trata-se de uma análise literária da novela *Billy Budd, marinheiro* escrita por Herman Melville utilizando conceitos de Nietzsche. No capítulo primeiro há um resumo do material crítico recentemente produzido sobre esta novela em um sentido geral. No segundo capítulo, a minha análise propriamente dita, o trabalho se foca em realizar uma exposição mostrando como é possível ler a novela a partir de alguns conceitos de Nietzsche. Mais precisamente uma análise de personagens, utilizando conceitos nietzschianos presentes no livro *Genealogia da Moral*. Os conceitos são: ressentimento, moral do senhor, moral do escravo e má consciência.

**Palavras-chave:** Billy Budd. Moral. Nietzsche. Melville. Crítica Literária.

## ABSTRACT

The present work concerns the subjects of Literature and Philosophy. It is a literary analysis of the novella *Billy Budd, sailor*, written by Herman Melville, using concepts of Friedrich Nietzsche. In the beginning, there is a summary of critical material produced in recent years concerning this novella in a broader sense; and later, the analysis narrows down to a critical exposition showing how many aspects of this novella, mainly character analysis, can be read in the light of some Nietzschean concepts present in the book, *On the genealogy of morality*, such as *ressentiment*, slave morality, master morality and bad consciousness.

**Keywords:** Billy Budd. Morality. Nietzsche. Melville. Literary Criticism.





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## INTRODUCTION

*Billy Budd, sailor* was written by the nineteenth-century North American author, Herman Melville (1819-1891). During my researches I found little produced about this masterpiece in Brazil. *Billy Budd, sailor* is a type of literary work called a novella. The novella is always written in prose and is between the novel and the short story in terms of length. In order to conduct my study, I used concepts of the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).

In this essay, I will present, in Chapter I, a general review of criticism on *Billy Budd, sailor*, commenting on the most recent critical work produced concerning this novella. In Chapter II, I will, at the same time, explain the concepts of Nietzsche and show how they helped me build my own interpretation of *Billy Budd, sailor*.

The idea for this essay appeared when I became interested in the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* being used to describe the way the political Left positions itself in many situations and how it is related to its failures on a global scale. The concept appears in many of Nietzsche's books, but it is best explained in *On the genealogy of morality* (1887). During this reading, I could not avoid remembering Billy Budd, the handsome sailor who was unfairly victimized by the envy of his companions on the ship.

I came back to the novella and saw that there was an analysis to be done. I thought that I had had an original idea, but in terms of academic research, I suppose this is always too good to be true; and during the researches I did for this essay, I found out that Richard H. Weisberg had had the same idea in 1989 and wrote a book called *The failure of the word: the protagonist as lawyer in modern fiction*. I have not had access to this book since it does not exist in e-book format, and a shipment from the international version of Amazon would take too long after the end of our semester. It is clear that Weisberg followed a very similar path to mine because it is the most obvious way when doing an analysis of *Billy Budd, sailor*, using the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*, but, in a sense, my analysis is "pure" of Weisberg influences for I did not have access to his book.

Although I had access to a very harsh criticism about Weisberg's work, made by Richard A. Posner, entitled "From *Billy Budd* to Buchenwald". I did not use this article as a reference for my essay for two reasons: first, because since Posner very much disagreed with Weisberg, my essay would have to be a response to his article; and secondly, I also found imprecisions in his views of Nietzsche's thought in comparison to those of a very

respected reader and commentator of Nietzsche's work which I use as a guide for a better understanding of the Nietzschean text, that is, Walter Kaufman's reading of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is also a very interesting philosopher to use when analyzing literary works for he is, in my opinion, one of the most literary of the philosophers. He was a philologist and had a great appreciation for style. Also, his famous psychotic attack in which he hugged a horse to prevent it from getting beaten by its owner is equal to a scene in Dostoyevsky's famous novel *Crime and punishment*.

*Billy Budd, sailor* is an excellent material for critics. It is the last book of an author who aged to make each work more complex and full of ambiguities, and *Billy Budd, sailor* is his last, unfinished text. It is a novella that can be read in multiple ways as this study will show, and presents one of the most interesting questions that we as humans ever faced: the question of good and evil.

## CHAPTER I – MELVILLE AND *BILLY BUDD, SAILOR*: a biographical and critical review

*Billy Budd, sailor* is a novella written by Herman Melville that was published only after his death and tells the story of a good sailor who was executed in an unfair situation, and it is considered one of Melville's masterpieces. Leon Howard, a biographer, says that Herman Melville was inspired by a real event, "The mutiny on the Somers", in which there were three executions, in order to write *Billy Budd, sailor*. A cousin of his, Guert Gansevoort, was involved in the trial of the Somers<sup>1</sup>. *Billy Budd, sailor* is the most read work by Melville after *Moby-Dick*<sup>2</sup>.

Although Herman Melville had previously attained success with his first books that were about adventures on the sea: *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), it is safe to say that he died in obscurity, but nowadays he surely has a position among the greatest writers of all time, and he is best known for his novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). Melville's success started to fade as soon as his novels assumed a more philosophical and metaphysical tone<sup>3</sup>. By the time it was published, *Moby-Dick* was not a success, but the peak of unpopularity happened with his next, autobiographical novel, *Pierre* (1852), which was a critical and popular failure, and some of his audience assumed that he had gone mad<sup>4</sup>. After that, Melville started writing shorter narratives (novellas), and, at the end of his life, he also wrote poetry.

The story of this novella occurs during the Napoleonic wars; the year is 1797. Real mutinies had happened that year, which suggests that was a climate of paranoia in the air. Billy Budd, the main character, is a sailor on duty on one of the British warships called *Bellipotent*. He is considered one of the best sailors: hard-working, charismatic, calm and a natural leader. But one of his superiors, Claggart, dislikes him out of envy and plots to accuse him of mutiny to the captain of the ship, Vere. Billy Budd cannot react to the injustice because of his stuttering and hits Claggart, killing him. The narrator says that his stuttering was a sign that Satan, too, had his hand over Billy. To summarize, Billy goes to a war trial and is executed for killing a superior.

At the beginning of the story, Billy Budd is chosen from the crew of a commercial ship to integrate the British navy. At that time, an officer could force anyone he would find

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<sup>1</sup>HOWARD, L. **Herman Melville**: a biography. California: University of California Press, 1967.

<sup>2</sup>YANELLA, D. Introduction. In: \_\_\_\_\_. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> HOWARD, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

fit to join the navy. Throughout the story, we are presented to the rivalry that Claggart develops towards Billy. Billy is a naive person and cannot understand why he is disliked by Claggart, who pokes around Budd's things in order cause trouble for him during inspections. After that, he interprets a moment in which Billy spills soup unintentionally as a threat, and finally he sets a guy to tempt Billy to participate in a mutiny. None of this succeeds in causing trouble for Billy, and so Claggart accuses him of mutiny to Captain Vere. Vere doesn't believe Claggart, but decides to put both men together, and that is when Billy strikes Claggart, resulting in Billy's death by execution. During the trial, the judges seem to be convinced about Billy's good nature, but Vere convinces them that the crime he committed is punished by hanging. What he did is considered mutiny because he attacked a superior. Billy waits for his execution calmly.

This novella is narrated in the first person, but we don't know who the narrator is or even if he was on board the ship, but he seems to speak with authority about the events. He talks about himself as if he had been a sailor and has knowledge about the sea life. He also seems to empathize with Billy.

One of the many interesting debates this novella offers is about the decision Captain Vere made that executing Billy was the right thing to do. During the whole process, Vere was sure that Billy was innocent of Claggart's accusations, but, being a man very attached to duty, he felt the need to confront both men; and with the tragic event, he again felt the need to conduct the trial according to the law about mutiny and not soften the penalty just because he knew that Billy was actually a good man. Vere is described as “ever mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline” and he is known by his man as “Starry Vere”. Critics with a historic point of view say that the procedures of the judgement needed to be harsher because they were in war times, and troops needed to be controlled<sup>5</sup>, whereas other critics say that the surgeon (another character of the novella) position was correct: according to the navy law at the time, Billy's case should have been taken to the Admiral<sup>6</sup>. The event raises questions about justice and its procedures. According to the procedures, Billy should be hanged, but is it real justice? In the official report, the author of which is not made clear, Billy Budd is portrayed as a wicked and violent man who coldly assassinated an older superior.

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<sup>5</sup>REYNOLDS, L. J. Billy Budd and American labor unrest: the case for striking back. In: YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 21-48.

<sup>6</sup>WENKE, J. Melville's indirection: Billy Budd, the genetic text, and “the deadly space between”. In: YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 114-144.

The Captain felt guilty for the rest of his life for what happened to Billy, as his last words in the novella show: “Billy Budd, Billy Budd”, whereas Billy seems to have forgiven him and kept admiring him, as his last words also show: “God Bless Captain Vere”. Some say that Billy’s last words could be read as irony, but this interpretation is wrong since the narrator describes Billy as naïve and incapable of understanding irony<sup>7</sup>. The whole event of Billy’s judgment has many elements that resemble Christ’s judgment.

Another interesting issue *Billy Budd, sailor* could offer concerns innocence. His nickname, Baby Budd could be indicative of his healthy constitution but also to his innocence. Billy has a very naive personality, which makes him incapable of understanding why Claggart is trying to get him into trouble. It is also possible to say that Claggart envies not only Billy's beauty, but also his kindness, since he is of an evil nature and probably cannot accept that someone can be as good as Billy. During the narrative, the narrator uses interesting images to describe Billy's naivety, such as saying that he is like "Adam before the fall", which means a creature that hasn't even been touched by evil, and "an upright barbarian", meaning someone who has little worldly knowledge. Another important thing to mention is that Billy's innocence is his tragic flaw. If he had more mundane knowledge, he could perceive Claggart's attitude against him, and the accusation wouldn't be taken as a surprise. There might also be a slight reference to the suffering of the black man in America since an African man is presented as another example of the handsome sailor, and it is possible to trace a parallel between the unfair treatment the black man received in America to Billy’s judgment<sup>8</sup>. Other readings point out that the problematic relationship between Claggart and Billy Budd could have homoerotic implications.<sup>9</sup>

Evil is another question that is important to be mentioned while analyzing this novella. Claggart, of course, is the character who represents evil here. The motivations that made him try to harm Billy are never completely clear, but they could be interpreted as envy. The narrator says, about him, that his real character is impossible to grasp. Almost nothing is said about his previous life, and it is not clear if what is said be true, as when it is said that he might be a foreigner. Some critics see *Billy Budd* as Melville’s testimony of acceptance of evil<sup>10</sup>. It is a position of resignation. There are critics who disagree with this view and say that

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<sup>7</sup> YANELLA, D. Introduction. In: \_\_\_\_\_. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> YANELLA, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> AUDEN, W. H. **The Enchafèd Flood**. New York: Randon House, 1950.

<sup>10</sup> YANELLA, op. cit.

*Billy Budd* should be read as an ironic work<sup>11</sup>. There are also critics who disagree with the homosexuality argument because Melville explicitly wanted the readers to see Billy and Claggart as stereotypes of good and evil respectively<sup>12</sup>. There is a citation that I find interesting for understanding Claggart's character in relation to evil.

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it.

This provides a considerable grasp to understand why someone with such an evil nature would envy someone with a natural good nature like Billy.

Some critics point out that the novella echoes times of revolutions and ideas of both the Democratic and Republican parties, which were known to Melville because his family had been associated with the famous Tea Party. In the essay "Billy Budd and American labor unrest: the case for striking back", the author, Larry J. Reynolds, argues that *Billy Budd, sailor* was written during agitated times in politics, in which there were insurrections: a society "anxious about violence and eager for order"<sup>13</sup>, in the words of the author, and this influenced his work as a place in which Melville could visit themes like "democracy and authority, revolution and reform, violence and order, which long have concerned him"<sup>14</sup>. The essayist suggests that, with *Billy Budd, sailor*, Melville states his point of view against revolution and in favor of reforms; he reinforces his arguments with biographical and historical material. He compares Billy to some anarchists who were unfairly judged in Chicago and brings Melville's personal correspondence to show that he is against revolutions since they favor an endless chain of violence and authoritarian governments.

The father-son relation between Billy and Vere, besides having obvious biblical implications, could also have some relation to the suicide of Melville's son, Malcolm, some

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<sup>11</sup> COFFER, G. Religion, myth, and meaning in the art of Billy Budd, sailor e WENKE, J. Genetic text and "the deadly space between". In: \_\_\_\_\_. YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New Essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> WITHIN, P. Billy Budd: testament of resistance STAFFORD, W.T.(Org.). In: \_\_\_\_\_. **Billy Budd and the Critics**. San Francisco: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1961. p.77

<sup>13</sup>REYNOLDS, L. J. Billy Budd and American labor unrest: the case for striking back. In: YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 22.

<sup>14</sup>REYNOLDS,L.J. Op. Cit.



critics with a biographical point of view suggest. Biographers say that Melville was a harsh father, and literary critics argued that Vere could be his representation in the novella.<sup>15</sup>

Another reading of this novel refers to the Judeo-Christian tradition and other mythologies. The critic Gail Goffer, in “Religion, myth, and meaning in the art of *Billy Budd, Sailor*”, points to connections between Billy and biblical heroes as well as to pagan heroes. The comparison to Alexander the Great can be seen very clearly in the narrative. Billy is also compared to Achilles, a very strong and handsome warrior, but with a tragic vulnerability that led to his defeat. Throughout the narrative, Billy is also compared to Apollo and Hercules. Hercules is known as a strong man who acted before thinking, although he had a good nature, which could be a reference to Billy’s striking Claggart. And Apollo is the Greek god of perfection and beauty.

With regards to the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the beginning of the novella, there is a reference to a black man as a son of Ham. Billy is seen as Adam before the fall. He is seen as an upright barbarian, a man “from a period prior to Cain’s city and civilized man” and someone who hasn’t had “the questionable apple of knowledge”. This novella has multiple references to events of the Bible. Also, Claggart, when dead, is referred to as a “dead snake”.

Coffer affirms that “Claggart is the operative moral guardian of the *Bellipotent*”.

Claggart possesses what Arnold describes as the Hebraic moral conscience: awakened to a sense of sin and disposed to religious faith, it is suspicious of beauty and pleasure and committed instead to a single-minded conception of what is true and righteous<sup>16</sup>.

Coffer also points out that his initials, J. C., are the same as John Calvin’s, and that he is an example of the Calvinistic archetype, always paying attention to other sea-men for any small vestige of sin. Although he is respected, Claggart is the reverse of a saint, this critic argues; he is actually a terrible sinner, envy and pride being his sins. It is also important to say that Melville was strongly against Calvinism.

In general, the novella’s references to myth associate Billy with the Hellenistic tradition and Claggart with the Hebraic tradition; this dichotomy doesn’t apply when we look

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<sup>15</sup> YANELLA, D. Introduction. In: \_\_\_\_\_. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> COFFER, G. Religion, myth, and meaning in the art of Billy Budd, sailor e WENKE, J. Genetic text and “the deadly space between”. In: \_\_\_\_\_. YANELLA, D. (Org.). **New Essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. p. 58.

at the fact that Billy is also associated with heavenly things of the Bible, like angels, and, also, we could compare his judgment to that of Christ himself.

Another essayist, John Wenke, wrote that we could interpret *Billy Budd, sailor* in two ways, looking at Captain Vere's decision. One presupposes a conservative Melville who, in this interpretation, did what he needed to do in order to restore peace and confidence in the ship, but a horrified man looking at a situation of injustice. The other is a liberal Melville, one who actually pictures Vere as an oppressor, being an evil authority figure in the ship for the sake of realpolitik.

Wenke also writes "the fact that *Billy Budd* criticism is replete with polarized arguments does not mean that one camp is right and the other is wrong. Rather, the text contains valid and reasonable grounds for numerous positions"<sup>17</sup>. He argues that Melville supposedly wrote an ambiguous text that deals with its moral dilemma and that works if you look at the narrator either as Melville's extension or as another fictitious persona.

But Wenke also asserts that reading *Billy Budd* is not a matter of attributing guilt to Vere for what happened, but gets into the moral complexities that an event like this could expose: "What the reader seems to determine is the worth of a civilization that demands this sacrifice"<sup>18</sup>.

It is also important to mention that there is a debate whether *Billy Budd, sailor* is a finished work or not. We could safely say that it is a finished work in the sense that he wrote the last page, but we don't know how many rewritings he might have thought necessary. The debate about this perhaps unfinished work extends to the fact that it is a work full of ambiguities, the last work Melville worked on during his final days. Some critics say *Billy Budd* it is like an X-ray of Melville's mind and his struggle to come to conclusions regarding moral questions. Also, some critics say that in *Billy Budd* we can see traces of all Melville's other works.

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<sup>17</sup>WENKE, J. Melville's indirection: Billy Budd, the genetic text, and "the deadly space between". In: YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p.118

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 2002. p.137.

## CHAPTER II – *BILLY BUDD, SAILOR IN THE LIGHT NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY: Billy Budd, Claggart and Vere examined according to Nietzsche's views on morality*

This chapter will describe my analysis of *Billy Budd, sailor*, using concepts of the nineteenth-century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. I will use concepts from the book *On the genealogy of morality*. Throughout my readings, I found no evidence that Herman Melville had read Nietzsche, although he had read one of Nietzsche's masters: Arthur Schopenhauer<sup>19</sup>. This analysis does not intend to be a definite explanation of the *Billy Budd, sailor* concerning morality; it is only a proposition to show how some subjects present in Melville's text can be seen through the light of Nietzsche's concepts.

Since this chapter will be concerned a great deal with the concept of morality, I will quote the definition from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy<sup>20</sup>:

1. descriptively to refer to certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behavior, or”;
2. normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons.

The first concept I wish to explain is that of *ressentiment*<sup>21</sup>. In his book *On the genealogy of morality*, Nietzsche argues that there was a shift in morality throughout human history, in which what he calls slave morality took the place of what he calls master morality. Previously, the noble men decided to call themselves “good” to differentiate themselves from the common people, whom they called “bad”. Previously the master morality was dominant, but with the Judeo-Christian ascension, western morality became the opposite of what it once was. *Ressentiment* is the feeling that slaves have against masters. It is a reactive feeling created by the condition of being powerless. It causes the man of *ressentiment* to define the man who flourishes as evil.

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<sup>19</sup> MILDNER, R. Old man Melville. In: YANNELLA, D. (Org.). **New essays on Billy Budd**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>20</sup>GERT, B.; GERT, J. The definition of morality. In: ZALTA, E. (Ed.). **The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**. 2017. Disponível em: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/morality-definition/>>. Acesso em: 30 out. 2017.

<sup>21</sup>NIETZSCHE, F. **On the genealogy of morality**. Tradução Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Slave morality is associated with plebeians and slaves, and master morality is associated to the **chilvaric**-aristocratic world. The second one values physical strength, good health, youth and things that are useful to win wars, whereas slave morality seek to avoid wars. The priestly caste was responsible for promoting this shift. Convincing the common people that master morality values were evil. Priests are impotent and weak, but their power resides in their capacity of hatred. The priestly caste hates strong and powerful people. With the ascension of slave morality, the hatred on the part of the priestly caste was successfully disguised<sup>22</sup>.

From this short explanation, we can see how the idea of *ressentiment* and slave morality applies to Claggart. The man of *ressentiment* says “no” to everything other than himself; he reacts. That is exactly what Claggart does in relation to Billy when he recognizes him as his opposite. The reverse happens with respect to master morality; there, the man looks for his opposite so that he can say “yes” to him. That matches a good deal with Billy’s behavior since he is described as a man who usually has very good relationships with people on the ship. Both master and slave moralities pose distortions of truth, but they differ. “The noble method of valuation makes a mistake and sins against reality, this happens in relation to a sphere with which it is not sufficiently familiar”<sup>23</sup>. It applies to the moment in which Billy unintentionally spills soup near Claggart, and this is interpreted as an insult. It could have happened because Billy actually despises Claggart, and Nietzsche alerts that noble disdain generates distortions different from those of the powerless man, which are filled with hatred and revenge, and that the disdain of the noble man contains a great deal of “too much negligence, nonchalance, complacency and impatience, even too much personal cheerfulness mixed into it”<sup>24</sup>, which seems exactly the case of Billy. Much is said about Claggart’s envy of Billy in the previous chapter; although envy and *ressentiment* are not the same thing, they surely have similarities, as may be obvious with the previous explanation; and for the sake of this analysis, I will assume that what happens with Claggart in relation to Billy is *ressentiment*.

Obviously, this analysis also excludes or doesn’t pay attention to the question of evil (in the common sense, not Nietzsche’s) in Claggart, and relies on the *ressentiment* supposition. It is possible to go even farther and say that Claggart sees Billy as evil because of his *ressentiment*. It is typical of the man of *ressentiment* to accuse of evil those who are

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<sup>22</sup>NIETZSCHE, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

strong, beautiful and successful. This explanation is in accordance to Coffey's affirmation (Cf. Chapter I), saying that Claggart is the moral guardian of the ship and indicating that Claggart may symbolize the Puritan and Calvinistic tradition which Melville was against. The fact that, in general, Billy is associated with the Hellenistic-pagan tradition and Claggart with the Hebraic or Judeo-Christian tradition also fits very well with what Nietzsche says about both traditions and slave/master morality.

Nietzsche uses philological knowledge to support his idea about master and slave morality prior to the ascension of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West, showing how old Greek words were used to denominate both noble and slave or plebeian. The words used to describe noble people are usually similar to the words that describe happiness, whereas the words for slaves and plebeians are similar to those that describe unhappiness. The words for *noble* in Greek also contain phonological similarities to upright and naïve, which are all words used to describe Billy. Nietzsche says that the men of *ressentiment* are neither upright nor naïve and also that they end up being more clever and respecting cleverness more than the nobility of birth<sup>25</sup>. Melville also says about Billy, "Noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse".

From a careless reading, it may look as if Nietzsche is in favor of master morality and against slave morality, but this is not exact. He also talks about the intelligence of the priest and observes that the history of mankind would have been stupid if not for the intellect of the powerless, that is, the man of *ressentiment*. His interest seems to be, for the moment, the origin of the terms *good* and *evil* and how their use has changed.<sup>26</sup>

Captain Vere is also a man of *ressentiment*, but instead of using Claggart's means to harm Billy, he uses law and duty against Billy. According to Nietzsche, guilt originally meant debt for not fulfilling some task and had nothing to do with responsibility or accountability. The master morality looks to punishment as a celebration, because it is fun to see and cause cruelty, whereas slave morality looks to punishment as a matter of education in relation to free will, the idea being that the one who is being punished could have acted in a different way<sup>27</sup>.

Bad consciousness<sup>28</sup> is another Nietzschean concept, and, according to him, the function of the punishment in slave morality systems is creating the awareness of guilt in the

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<sup>25</sup>NIETZSCHE, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> KAUFFMAN, W. **Nietzsche**: philosopher, psychologist, antichrist. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> NIETZSCHE, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup>NIETZSCHE, op. cit.

one who is being punished. There is no evidence in the novella that Billy felt guilty. Bad consciousness, however, does not begin with punishment, but with the end of hunter-gathering societies and the beginning of settlements. People were in debt with the community, and in a second moment with the state, from the beginning of their lives. The advent of monotheist religions is also strictly related to the idea of debt to the community, and that is what the Judeo-Christian tradition is all about. Bad consciousness has to do with what Vere did to Billy. Billy is not shown to have guilt, but Vere is. And Vere constantly affirms his debt with the King. The ship's officers knew Billy was good and that they were going to commit an injustice, but they had to do it for guilt; bad consciousness and debt with the state/community are represented in the figure of the King. For this reason, between John Wenkes distinctions in the previous chapter, this analysis stays more on the side of the liberal Melville, who paints Vere as an oppressor who incriminates Billy for the sake of realpolitik.

Again, it is necessary to say that Nietzsche doesn't see the advent of bad consciousness as entirely bad. With it, according to him, man gained inner life and became aware of beauty.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>KAUFFMAN, W. **Nietzsche**:philosopher, psychologist, antichrist. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013.

## CONCLUSION

*Billy Budd, sailor* remains a very ambiguous piece of work, and I would even go so far as to say the more different interpretations appear about this novella, the more ambiguous it becomes, for none of them is able to grasp the complexities of Melville's text. All the interpretations cited in Chapter I and my own interpretation go in completely different directions, and yet all of them are suitable. It is true that some of them can present intersections if we visualize this interpretation like Ven diagrams. Mine, and probably Richard Weisberg's, too, have some points of intersections with Coffey's and Wenke's as shown in Chapter II.

There are many philosophers who wrote works concerning morality that would be suitable to be used to analyze *Billy Budd, sailor*, since this novella exposes, mainly, a moral dilemma. Someone could perform an analysis of *Billy Budd, sailor* using Aristotle's or Kant's views on morality. I chose Nietzsche's point of view because it seemed to me to be the one more drastically opposed to the way a Christian approach would view the moral problem in the novella. And also, for obvious reasons, the Christian perspective is also the most similar to the common sense and, at the same time, the most used point of view used to tackle the moral question with events on the *Bellipotent*, even in academic interpretations.

Nietzsche is also famous for his perspectivism, the idea that we should see the same problem from the most varied perspectives possible; since there is no absolute truth, the way we could better get near it is through perspectivism. In Chapter I, I tried to present various frames of reference on *Billy Budd, sailor*: Larry J. Reynolds, concerning a time of revolutions and insurgences and how they could have influenced Melville to write the novella in response to them; Gail Coffey's view, approaching myths of both the Hebraic and the Hellenic traditions as a way to explain the novella; and finally, James Wenke's view with a genetic literary criticism, that is, analyzing the different versions of the text and how it changed. Taking **this** views into consideration, I can conclude that I, too, and Richard Weisberg, offered here a unique panorama of the events concerning Billy, Claggart and Vere.

My main argument is that Billy Budd is not a scapegoat Christ-like figure or anyone like a martyr of Christianity, as many interpretations present, but a figure opposite to this. He is indeed someone devoid of guilt or any kind of inner complex thoughts related to sin or something like it. He is "Adam before the fall" and an "upright barbarian", that is, a pagan with another set of virtues like the Greeks, the Romans, the Angles and also the Sub-Saharan Africans, like the other handsome sailor at the beginning of the novella. All these cultures

have their whole set of virtues, which were linked to master morality, buried by the Christian wave, but not completely buried as characters like Billy Budd may show.



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