

CHAPTER IV

A STUDY OF MAJOR SYMBOLISM IN BILLY BUDD

Almost similar to the story of the previous chapter, Billy Budd is also about the struggle between good and evil. Evil exists in the world and it is powerful enough to destroy the good. Related to Billy Budd, the novel is more than moral guidance between good and evil deeds.

I find the work not an essay on a moral issue but a form embodying the feeling and idea of thinking about a moral issue, the experience of facing, of choosing, of being uneasy about one's choice, of trying to know (Gordon, 1968: 723).

In revealing his idea about the reality of evil in the life of every man, Herman Melville uses symbolism, for through symbolism, he could make the story more powerful because the readers are asked to interpret the meaning of symbols of the plot of the story. Like in The Secret Sharer, symbolism in Billy Budd is divided into

three groups, natural, conventional, and private symbols.

The first symbol in Billy Budd is natural symbol. Natural symbol is all man's physical environment except what he himself has created (Potter, 1967: 187). The sea is the only natural symbol in this story because it is the only nature which appears in Billy Budd. The sea in this novel also exists naturally.

As the natural symbol, the sea in Billy Budd is the symbol of human's line of life. The sea is considered as a line of life because it shows series of actions from the stage of innocence to the stage of maturity. In the sea Billy Budd passes from the "Rights- of- Man" (Melville, 1988: 7) to the "Indomitable" (Melville, 1988: 9). He passes from the innocent life to the mature life in which man has to assume responsibility. As Billy leaves the innocent years of his childhood behind, he starts to assume responsibility in his adulthood. The sea also symbolizes the unpredictability of social life. Sea is unpredictable because at one time it is placid and another time it suddenly can become very wild. In the journey through the sea, man should be aware of the unpredictable danger. The same condition is true in the social life of mankind, which is also unpredictable. Therefore, one must be aware of possible danger which may suddenly harm him. For instance, a person may not realize that the environment surrounding him is

dangerous. Without his knowing it, this environment may turn him from a good person to a bad one.

On the sea, Billy is unaware of the danger. The potential danger to Billy's life is to be found in Claggart who tries to destroy Billy's life. Billy never suspects that Claggart will harm him because he finds Claggart to be friendly to him. In human's life, man very often does not realize the existence of danger because sometimes the danger of life seems harmless. For instance, if A is jealous of B, A will pretend to be friendly because he is hiding his jealousy. In this case, B will never suspect that A may harm him.

In the adventure through the sea, man faces the forces of nature, so that man is challenged to struggle for life. In Billy Budd, there are the forces of natural innocence embodied by Billy and the forces of natural evil represented by Claggart. Billy is the natural innocence because he is totally innocent. Billy does not know anything about good and evil. On the other side, Claggart is totally evil because like the character of evil which always tries to win against the goodness, Claggart tries to tempt Billy.

Another important symbol in Billy Budd is the ship. It is the conventional symbol. The ship is considered as conventional symbol because the ship is widely known and often used as the symbol of the small world or society

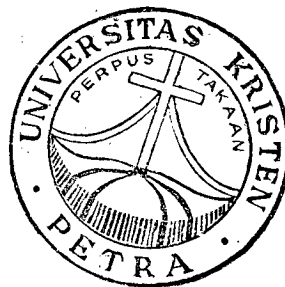
(Melville, 1988: viii). The use of conventional symbol in this story makes the reader relate the two worlds which Billy lives in with the real world.

Ship is an imitation of real world. In it, man leads his life like in the real world. A ship is a small society which has rules to follow and life to live in. Where as in the real world man may have a hard life, in the ship man may have the same predicaments.

Life on a sailing ship usually involved as well, poor food, hard labor, the treat of disease, injury, or death, and the tyranny of superiors, including whippings for minor infractions and hangings for major ones (Melville, 1988: viii).

In Billy Budd, there are two ships which represent a type of society in real life. The names of the two ships in this novel are "Rights- of- Man" and "Indomitable". According to dictionary, the name "Rights- of- Man" means natural rights and "Indomitable" means the hard life. Therefore, from the meaning of the names of the ships one may form an idea as to the real situation on board.

The "Rights- of- Man" is the symbol of natural society and "Indomitable" is the symbol of civilized society. In the "Rights- of- Man" Billy lives in a world in which he is not required to assume responsibility. The "Rights- of- Man" is the natural society because the social life in this ship is clearly and certainty



presented as natural to man. It is not enforced by authority. The situation for this statement is described by the action of Billy when he quiets the last trouble maker, Red Whiskers. He does it naturally, not by civilized or social means.

So, in the second dog watch one day the Red Whiskers, in presence of showing Billy just whence a sirloin steak was cut- for the fellow had once been a butcher- insultingly give him a dig under the ribs. Quick as lightning, Billy let fly his arm. I dare say he never meant to do quiet as much as he did but anyhow he gave the burly fool a terrible drubbing (Melville, 1988: 6).

In this ship Billy is innocent. His experience is just the experience of his own inner purity and idealism (Gordon, 1968: 735).

Billy leaves the natural world of the "Rights- of- Mam" and he moves to the "Indomitable". This ship signifies civilized society. It is considered a civilized society because the life in this ship is organized. The life in this ship is regulated by rules which everybody should observe. "It is a warship in hostile water and so a fitting symbol for society at its most organized and most authoritarian" (Gordon, 1968: 727). As Billy changes ship, he is in fact leaving the world of natural rights and entering the strictly organized society.

In the "Indomitable", Billy changed. The world of

peace and rights is replaced by the world of military discipline. In this ship, Billy is interrogated by an officer about his background and birthplace, something which he has never experienced while he is with the "Rights- of- Man".

Asked by the officer, a small, brisk little gentleman as it chanced, among other question, his place of birth, he replied, "Please, sir, I don't know". "Don't know where you were born? Who was your father?" "God knows, sir" ... (Melville, 1988: 10)

On "Indomitable" Billy takes his responsibility. He is hanged because he kills Claggart. Actually, Billy is not guilty because Claggart has falsely accused him of mutiny. In the civilized society which is closely regulated by human-made law, Billy is found guilty of murder under the law of Mutiny Act for killing Claggart. It can be said that "the killing of Claggart is divine justice, but on the "Indomitable" it is murder of superior officer under wartime condition" (Gordon, 1968: 760).

Finally, some main characters in Billy Budd like Billy Budd, John Claggart, and Captain Vere may be considered as private symbols. They are called private symbol because Herman Melville uses them for his purpose to reach the theme of the story. In other stories, Melville or other writers may create different private

symbols to present the same meaning. Without reading the story, the reader cannot know what they symbolize. The reader can only know that they are symbols from the whole context of the story. In Billy Budd the use of the private symbol is not so private, so the reader can still generate the meaning from the context.

As private symbols Billy and Claggart symbolize the two sides of the nature of man. Good and evil exist side by side. Billy is the good side of man and Claggart is the evil side of man. Billy, the good, is the symbol of a natural man. In his natural state, Billy is often compared to Adam before the fall, and to Christ in his attribute as a peace maker and the victim of false accusation. The writer suggests him as "Baby Budd" which means he is innocent like a baby who does not know the evil of the world.

At most we can say that Billy is Christ-like and Adam-like in his innocence and Christ-like in his role as victim. It is fitting that the world in which "Baby Budd" is most at home is the world of the Rights-Of-Man which, Melville tells us, is named after Paine's book; the world of the Rights Of Man is a natural world just as Billy Budd is a "natural man" (Gordon, 1968: 726)

As a natural man, he does not realize the danger of evil in his life. Billy morally and intellectually never leaves the life in the ship named the "Rights-Of-Man", where the life goes on peacefully and naturally.

Billy never hurts other people. Although Claggart hates him, Billy does not care for it. But when Claggart is directed by Captain Vere to tell Billy face to face the story he previously told the captain about Billy's part in the conspiracy, of course he becomes angry. So, out of control, Billy strikes Claggart on the head which causes Claggart's death.

When confronted by his accuser in the presence of Captain Vere, Billy is so agitated by the monstrous falseness of the charge that he cannot speak to deny it in words, and he impulsively strikes Claggart so hard a blow on the forehead that he falls to the deck dead (Abel, 1963: 450).

In this case, Billy, feels that he is not guilty because he is right and Claggart is wrong.

In addition, Billy's innocence can be compared to "Adam before the fall" as the following quotation shows:

A youth of outstanding physical beauty and of sincere kindness toward all with whom he comes in contact, Billy exhibits the most ingenuous innocence, reflecting a complete unawareness of existence of evil. In fact because of his innocent nature Billy is compared to Adam before the fall (Emerson, 1968: 38).

Because of his innocence, Billy does not realize that Claggart may harm him. He only knows that everybody in the ship loves him. Billy does not even believe that

Claggart hates him.

Billy Budd has lost his innocence after he knows the evil of life. If there is a serpent in the Garden of Eden to tempt Adam, there is Claggart in the ship who tempts Billy. Later on, because of Claggart's false accusation toward Billy, Billy is tempted to commit an act of anger and violence. "The next instant, quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck" (Melville, 1988: 71). After striking Claggart, Billy finally recognizes the evil of Claggart and finds the potentiality of evil in himself. Because of this knowledge, he falls from the state of innocence that he held before.

Moreover, Billy can be compared to Jesus Christ in his character as a peace maker.

"Beg pardon, but you don't understand, Lieutenant. See here, now. Before I shipped that young fellow, my fore-castle was a rat-pit of quarrels. It was black times, I tell you, aboard Rights here. I was worried to that degree my pipe had no comfort for me. But Billy came; and it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in Irish shindy ..." (Melville, 1988: 5)

Billy is comparable to Christ in the sense that both of them are the victim of false accusation. Billy is falsely accused by Claggart of having taken part in a conspiracy. Claggart accuses him because he hates Billy. In the case

of Christ, He is betrayed by Judas. As H. E. Hudson says that both Billy and Christ are falsely accused of the same crime- treason (Gordon, 1968: 755). Like Jesus Christ, Billy does not speak a word to defend himself. From the story the statement is stated: "..., serving to bring out his lurking defect and in this instance for the time intensifying it into a convulsed tongue- tie, ..." (Melville, 1988: 71).

Another similarity between Billy and Christ is that Billy is as forgiving as Christ. The forgiveness of Christ on the Cross is shown before the execution has taken. Billy forgives Captain Vere for his wrong decision to execute him. In the story, Herman Melville writes that "at the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance were these: "God bless Captain Vere!" (Melville, 1988: 101).

In Billy Budd, the evil is John Claggart. He is considered evil because like the character of evil, Claggart wants to destroy Billy's life. Claggart's friendly behavior toward Billy makes Billy never suspects that Claggart hates him. Even when the Old Dansker told Billy that Claggart hates him, Billy refuses to believe the Dansker. Billy protests the Dansker's telling about Claggart. Billy says that Claggart always speak pleasantly to him.

The old man, shoving up the front of his tarpaulin and deliberately rubbing the long slant scar at the point where it entered the thin hair, laconically said, "Baby Budd, Jemmy Leg's (meaning the master-at-arms) is down on you".

.....

"Jemmy Leg!" ejaculated Billy, his welkin eyes expanding. "What for? Why, he calls me, 'the sweet and pleasant young fellow,' they tell me.

.....

"No, not always. But to me he has. I seldom pass him but there comes a pleasant word" (Melville, 1988: 36).

Because of his innocence, Billy considers that every man is like himself. Therefore, Claggart will not harm him.

In contrast with Billy, Claggart symbolizes all of the bad side of man. Claggart is the natural evil in human life. As the evil, Claggart is the tempter and destroyer of Billy's life. He is considered as the serpent of Eden or Satan. He hates Billy and tries to destroy him.

Claggart is linked with the serpent of the Garden of Eden. One hot night Billy is sleeping on the upper deck when he is awakened by someone who whisper nervously to him by saying "Hist" and again "Hist, Hist!" (Melville, 1988: 51). The sound "Hist, Hist!" signifies the sound of a serpent who tempts Billy to join the mutiny.

"Hist, Hist!" the hurried whisper now growing husky. "See here," and the man held up two small objects twinkling in the night-light; "see, they are yours, Billy, if you'll only --" (Melville, 1988: 51)

When Claggart is directed to tell the accusation of joining a mutiny, face to face with Billy, he is seen as a fascinated serpent. It is written in the story: "The first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination" (Melville, 1988: 71).

The serpent figure is shown again when the sailors carry away the dead body of Claggart. After Billy has struck the fatal blow which has caused Claggart's death, Captain Vere feels that moving Claggart's body is "like handling a dead snake" (Melville, 1988: 72).

Captain Vere, however, stays between the good side and the bad side. He is the symbol of authority. His decision to hang Billy is a moral responsibility. Captain Vere knows that Billy is innocent, but when Billy hears the accusation of Claggart, Billy is unable to say a word to defend himself. In this situation, Captain Vere tries to help Billy indirectly because Billy is in the right side.

"Speak, man!" said Captain Vere to the transfixed one, struck by his aspect even more than by Claggart's. "Speak! Defend yourself!" Which appeal caused but a strange dumb gesturing and gurgling in Billy; ... (Melville, 1988: 71)

Billy is still unable to defend himself that he is not involved in the mutiny but instead he strikes Claggart dead. Captain Vere is faced with a dilemma; whether to defend Billy or not. Because of moral responsibility, although he loves Billy as his son, he says that Billy must be hanged. Captain Vere realizes that Billy's death is a sacrifice to preserve the King's law. Caught between love and duty, Captain Vere chooses duty.