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HERMAN MELVILLE'S "BILLY BUDD": A STUDY OF CONFLICT BETWEEN
GOOD AND EVIL

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ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's novel "Billy Budd" is based on his personal experiences as a sailor. Melville wrote under the influence of the hardships of sea life. He wrote the novel with a sense of romance and adventure but at the same time exposed the dangers and drudgery of naval life. The traumatic experience of the ship-board life had been so deep that 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. This paper deals with the different types of conflict between good and evil, which seems to put Melville in the proper light not simply as a master of sea tales, but in the line of the serious writers who concern themselves with the central problem of man's destiny.

Key words: Good, evil, experience, society, life, innocent.

Introduction

Among the writers of the nineteenth century American fiction, Herman Melville stands out prominently and holds a prestigious position. He is known as the most eminent figure in the world of American literature. His popularity is due to his extra-ordinary writings which are the outcome of the actual incidents which he faced in his life. Herman Melville is a great novelist that the American literature has ever produced. This paper reveals how Billy, the idol of goodness is sandwiched between two evil forces. One opposing is society and the other is a person like master – at – arms, Claggart. Billy, a happy – go – lucky man suffers miserably and ends in destruction. Billy is a good man and stays good till end when he utters "God bless Captain Vere"¹ with dying breath. Claggart is evil and remains the same despite the occasional look on his face "the man of sorrows".² Captain vere finds it necessary to suppress the voice of his conscience in order to uphold the military law. The extraordinary way of presenting good and evil obviously shows how Billy's innocence is inevitably foredoomed by black malice. Claggart is a dark mysterious man. He is the antagonist to Billy, the godlike protagonist. If Billy is Adam before the fall, Claggart represents the Serpent who introduces the innocent man to pure evil. This comparison clearly explores the conflict between good and evil.

Types of Conflict

Conflict gives the elements of interest and suspense in any form of literature whether it is a fiction, a drama or a short story. At least one of the opposing forces is generally a person. This person may involve in different types kinds of conflicts. First, Man versus Man, he may fight against another person, second, Man versus Society in which, he may struggle against social traditions or rules as a force, and third Man versus Self, two elements within the character himself may struggle for mastery.

The first conflict in the novel between good and evil is between Man and Man. John Claggart, the antagonist in the story, shows ultimate evil. His evil is strong; no goodness is ever portrayed through him. Claggart seeks chance of conflict with Billy Budd, an innocent and good man on the ship. He is wholly good. There is not even an iota of evil or wickedness in Billy, and he ignores the existence of evil. His full name is William but owing to his childish nature, sailors call him Budd, which has to bloom now. Billy's simplicity goodness, innocence arouses a feeling of envy in Claggart. 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." ³

This is the most dangerous evil because Claggart had not learned it. It is a natural evil, born with him. Claggart's evil is beyond that of a human nature. Human nature is to commit sin, but it also gives man the choice of differentiating between good and evil. But in the case of Claggart, his conscience is only an instrument which merely strengthens his ideas only for evil.

The pinnacle of Claggart's evil comes in the novel with Claggart's false charge upon Billy for being the leader of a mutinous group. He blames Billy of spreading mutiny among the sailors. Hearing this, Billy goes mad and kills Claggart. But the conflict does not come to an end. This creates another conflict between good and evil that is between Man and Society. Though his inclination was not the assassination of the evil man but in the eyes of men Billy is guilty of this heinous crime. When captain Vere asks him the reason of this horrible act, he says,

"There was no malice between us.....I am sorry that he is dead. I did not mean to kill him." ⁴

Billy's blow was not logical, but an act of impulsive action, an act of without any thought of consequence. He is innocent in what he is, not in what he has done. Captain Vere, the captain of the ship remains fatherly to Billy but after this incident he orders for Billy's hanging in order to keep the social law secure. Though Vere knows the bitterness of the military law, but he goes along with it. He thinks of the justice which is appropriate in society

"The mutiny act made no exceptions for the palliative circumstances. The officers responsibility is to adhere to it and administers it. The exceptional in the matter moves the heart and conscience but it cannot move the without the judge." ⁵

Human law and the law of nature are different. Human law looks primarily on man's action, on the reality that is present. It is practical; Vere says, "It is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with." ⁶

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.

Charles A. Reich says, "To preserve one's life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be Plaines and highest duty to sacrifice it." ⁷

Captain Vere, before the evil social law, suffers from an inner conflict. He very well knows the necessity of taking decision. An upright and determined 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 must be upheld at any cost. Society creates tyrannous rules to make it fundamentally strong. It is the social system which is responsible to produce evil at the very extent. Though, the sin is not very serious but the social cruel laws insist man to bear various difficulties which born such more kinds of evils on the large scale. The social habits and behavior prove harmful to the world. The more cruel laws are made the more cruel evils 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 evil. Evil does not know the discrepancy between right and wrong.

In this predicament human beings often find themselves. There is no escape from such situation. Man is thus doomed creature. One way or another, 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". ⁸

This is perfectly portrayed in the main character's action; their struggles, conflict 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 duty, a preoccupation so excessive which seems to be almost evil. Claggart and Billy represent the two extremes, goodness and evil; and the novel tells the story of their actions and interactions.

Billy's hanging reminds of the crucifixion. James E. Miller finds the Christ as the dominant metaphor of the story. He says:

"Almost invariably Melville has described his Titanic heroes as stricken Christ. But with none has the analogy being as complete as with Billy Budd."⁹

Billy, at his end, appears to be a Christ figure. He sacrifices his life in the interest of the large good. Melville believes at the end that though good goes to defeat and death, but its radiance redeems life. Billy becomes a martyr among sailors.

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the novel Melville presents Billy as a good man but at the end Billy strikes Claggart down and destroys the evil. The world is full of good and evil and there is no good way to fight it, but in the end the unavoidable might be the only way to defeat the evil. Melville gives Billy superhuman qualities and portrays Claggart with antagonistic qualities to demonstrate conflict between good and evil. The road of goodness leads to heaven, while the evil path leads to hell. Good versus evil is good story line because one cannot exist without the other. In everyone there is a bit of evil or good, as it is the part of our nature, and we struggle through the battle every day. There are two fundamental ways of life: the way of goodness and the way of evil. If the fall of man had not taken place, there would have been only one way of life, one road for man to go. The world is divided between the good and the evil principles, and they are twin brothers. Good and evil are the flip of the same coin. Where there is evil, good also exists.

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