

MELVILLE'S USE OF DESCRIPTION IN BILLY BUDD

PAUL ELLING

AP ENGLISH

JANUARY 11, 1996

Description is essential to making a story interesting. It is one of the most important if not the most important parts of a story. Herman Melville uses similes and metaphors, imagery, and details to describe his story, Billy Budd.

Similes and metaphors depict three eminent parts of Billy Budd. First, the crew of Billy "would flank, or like a bodyguard quite surround" Billy. (1) Billy is the superstar of the crew. The crew (accept for Claggart) loves Billy, and they treat him like a celebrity. Melville also describes Billy with similes and metaphors. Billy comes to the Rights-of-Man "like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy." (5) Billy's arrival is like a revival for the crew. The crew enjoys Billy's upbeat attitude, which is a positive influence on them. Finally, Melville describes the ship with metaphors. Captain Gaveling says, "...my forecastle was a rat-pit of quarrels." (5) The forecastle is like a busy pit with rats. Gaveling claims Billy is the reason for the quarrels. Just as similes and metaphors describe Billy Budd, imagery does too.

Imagery is another vital description of Billy Budd. Most visible is the innocence of Billy. Billy is an obedient sailor, and he follows orders. Billy's innocence is so natural that he is "little more than a sort of upright barbarian." (10) While innocence is a desirable quality, it also hurts Billy. In being totally unassuming of anyone, Billy is hanged for Claggart's charge of mutiny. Billy's virtue leads into the second major

image, which is Claggart's evil quality. The evil quality that roams Claggart's heart is envy. "Claggart's envy struck deeper" than just being jealousy of Billy. (31) Claggart only aims this envy towards Billy, and it results in disaster for both of them--their deaths. The third outstanding image is service, which Captain Vere exemplifies throughout Billy Budd. Captain Vere already demonstrates service for his years as "a sailor of distinction even in a time prolific of renowned seamen." (16) Captain Vere does his best to provide leadership to the Bellipotent. In return, the sailors treat him with the honor and respect due to a captain. After the Claggart and Billy disaster, Captain Vere acts for the good of the ship by getting rid of the distraction. Imagery is an undeniably important piece in the description of Billy Budd.

Finally, details play their influential role in Melville's description. Obviously, Billy is the subject of details. Billy has a few titles that portray his qualities, like "Handsome Sailor", "Baby Budd", and "Peacemaker". These show that he is good-looking, young, and peaceful. While Melville pictures Billy with details, the crew is a model. Red Whiskers receives his nickname for his red hair. Melville paints Red Whiskers as a burly man, who is formerly a butcher. Captain Vere is "a bachelor of forty or thereabouts." (16) Melville talks of Vere as a serious-minded, orderly captain. Finally, details of mutiny run rampant throughout Billy Budd. It is a distressing word, and

people have fear of speaking it. Claggart is reluctant to inform his captain that mutiny is apparent. Claggart only speaks after Vere commands, "Be direct, man." (44) Mutiny is the worst word for Captain Vere to hear. Details are the third chapter of description that is noticeable in Billy Budd.

The use of similes and metaphors, imagery, and details delineates Melville's Billy Budd well. Like so many other great writers, Melville puts description into its best uses.