A Commentary of Ambivalence:

An Exploration of Authority and Leadership in the works of Herman Melville

by

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Abstract

This thesis provides an exploration of authority as a thematic element in the works of Herman Melville. In the pages that follow, I will conduct an analysis of many of the author's iconic works of fiction which most intricately deal with this central idea, which itself reflects many of Melville's own frustrations and experiences. While the theme of authority in these works is certainly not understated, there are a number of complexities within the issue that require a deeper analysis of the work to truly grasp. For instance, Melville goes to great lengths to illustrate the differences between an authoritarian and a leader. To Melville, simply possessing legal authority is not sufficient to create an effective demonstration of leadership. Melville asserts that leaders must always be questioned and evaluated to ensure that they do not abuse the power which has been granted them.

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Introduction: Exploring Authority and Leadership in the Works of Melville

"From the day he stepped aboard a merchantman until he left the customhouse some fifty years later, Herman Melville felt the galling shackles of restraint" comments scholar Nicholas Canaday on the life of one of American's most renowned writers (1). It is clear that Herman Melville was very much a man subjected to the regulation of authority for much of his life, and we see that theme, as much as any other, reflected in his many works of fiction. Appearing in virtually all of Melville's work is a commentary on authority which is usually exemplified through a central character. In the case of Melville's works, many (though not all) of them are set aboard a ship, usually making the ship's captain the central figure through which a reader might analyze Melville's commentary on authority in each particular selection. Through each of these commentaries, utilizing the captains as a representation of authority, Melville demonstrates a lifelong ambivalence toward authority and its unstable nature, criticizing the abuse of authority, simultaneously suggesting that achieving such an ideal situation is unlikely if not an impossibility.

To understand why Melville incorporated such commentary in his work, it is necessary to briefly ascertain a degree of historical context in which we may place the time he wrote. During the mid-19th century, America was struggling with a number of social issues during which strong leadership was both needed and lacking. Among these issues were slavery, western expansion, and war. Melville recognized in each of these the dramatic effect that leadership would have on the development of the nation and the direction the world would take. Taking this into account, it becomes obvious that Melville would have also taken note of the detrimental effects that inferior leadership would have upon such development and direction. One such issue that quickly moved to the forefront of Melville's attention was the very unpopular Mexican War, of which Melville

was a known detractor. Andrew Delbanco writes in his biography of Melville that he was asked to write a series of sketches on the well-known military leader, General Zachary Taylor, which he titled "Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack." These sketches more often than not proved satirical rather than honorary, demonstrating a "waver[ing] between affection and contempt…that tell us something about [Melville's] growing political confusion" (105). The parallels between Melville's satirical sketches of Taylor and his wavering faith in the direction which America's leadership was taking it proved beyond coincidental.

Slavery was, by far, the most controversial issue during Melville's writing prime, working its way into many other social and governmental issues of the day. Melville's stance against slavery was profound, to say the least, and it would influence his writing heavily. Melville's staunch opposition to the Mexican war, while involving a number of motivating factors, arose primarily because of the role it played in the political battle over the slavery issue. While not opposed to American expansion, Melville was greatly concerned about additional American territories entering the Union as slave states, a scenario almost guaranteed as an outcome of the Mexican War, which Delbanco notes "was not so much making the world safe for democracy as for slavery" (105). In a situation which the addition of a slave state to the Union would completely disrupt the balance of power and in which the government continually compromised on the issue in order to avoid conflict, Melville recognized that strong leadership would be the only possible solution to the problematic slavery issue, which was allowed to spread in spite of resounding moral objections.

Given the state of American politics during the time that Melville wrote many of his most popular works, it is not hyperbolic to suggest that Melville would not only have criticized the politics of the country, but also the political leaders who brought about such a state. It is not

happenstance that the United States went through a series of inadequate presidents during this time, with Abraham Lincoln being the great leader who would finally break the mold, embodying the pro-union, anti-slavery politics which Melville supported. From 1845 to 1861, however, America was very much in need of such a leader, and while Melville did not seek to target any one individual in the iconic novels he would produce during these years, each of them explores the issues of authority, the ability to lead, and the abuse of power. Such a consistent, recurrent appearance of these themes in his works suggests an intended study of human leadership on the part of Melville, one that would span his complete works from *Typee* (1846) to *Billy Budd* (1891).

There are few settings more suited to the exploration of authority as a theme than that of a ship at sea; featuring a unique hierarchy and command structure, whether a military or civilian vessel, the ship becomes an isolated nation on its own, removed from the influence of the land. The captain acts as dictator of the isolated nation, maintaining absolute authority over his men and his ship. Melville compares the captain in *White-Jacket* to a king, noting that "it is not twelve o'clock till he says so" (23). In such an environment, Melville would find the perfect setting, allowing a thorough exploration of the nature of authority and how leaders interact with it. The approach Melville takes during this exploration varies from novel to novel, but remains constantly present.

In *Typee* (Melville's first work of fiction), for instance, the captain of the Dolly, while not a central character, is ultimately the reason why Tommo and Toby decide to desert the ship. An incident that occurs on the ship concerning Captain Vangs is clearly indicative of Melville's great concern with both authority and the abuse thereof. This may suggest to the reader a view of Melville as an anti-authoritarian. We see further evidence of his heretical views in *Typee* as he

expands his criticism of authority from a single captain to society itself, condemning it for its attempts to force its methods, traditions, and religion upon others.

In *White-Jacket*, Melville seeks to illuminate the divergence between raw authority and natural leadership abilities, utilizing the reactions of the crew as an assessment of each. Under the command of a captain who possesses lawful authority over his men but lacks the charm and charisma necessary to instill trust, the crew, represented primarily by the narrator, questions his commands and actions with regularity. In spite of this resistance to authority, the crew members are obedient and unquestioning of lower ranking crew members who exhibit competency in their leadership. The ultimate target of Melville's criticisms in *White-Jacket* are those who do not recognize the difference between possessing authority and possessing the ability to command, those who seek to maintain authority through fear and oppression.

Moby-Dick serves as a continuation of Melville's criticism of authority, but it does so with a different approach, introducing a number of new factors for consideration, including sympathetic authority figures who, while fatally flawed, are not of the traditional black and white mold that so often characterizes early Melville authoritarians. In Ahab, Melville creates a captain possessing the natural leadership abilities needed to sway those under his command, but who is also dangerously abusive of the authority he possesses. Because he possesses such intelligence and charisma, Ahab is able to easily sway his crew to follow him in his vendetta to kill the white whale. His insanity combined with his charisma make Ahab an especially dangerous representation of authority. This is affirmed when the focal point of Melville's crucial lens, Ishmael, abandons his suspicion of Ahab, melding with the collective consciousness of the crew and ultimately turning the narrative itself over to his captain.

In “Benito Cereno,” Melville diverts from his approach in *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* from focusing on the dynamic between the captain and his crew to a focus on the captains exclusively. Transitioning from a first person narrator to the third person, Melville deconstructs the authority figures of the story, gradually stripping them of all authority, and also demonstrating the debilitating effects of prejudice and racism on a leader’s ability to maintain his authority. Even the law itself, the ultimate authority, proves inadequate with its racist and prejudicial overtones. While other Melville novels demonstrate the obligation of the led to the leader, “Benito Cereno” explores the very opposite, asserting the obligations of those in power to the people that they lead.

In Melville’s final work, Billy Budd, we see a very different portrayal of the authority figure in the form of Captain Vere, a very intelligent and thoughtful representation of authority. Throughout the plot, it is clear that Vere looks to make decisions that will keep the morale and order of the ship in balance. This remains true even when he essentially forces the jury to find Billy guilty, condemning him to death. Melville provides ample context for the reasons behind Vere’s actions, and even portrays him as somewhat regretful that events turn out as they do. Overall, Vere is portrayed as a good captain, authority in a positive light. Authority itself is even portrayed as a necessity from the book’s beginning which provides the reader with very telling context, suggesting that though unpleasant, authority is at times needed to ensure the greater good.

While Melville’s ambivalence toward authority is most pronounced in the novels with a shipboard setting, presenting a clear, distinct demarcation of roles, it is noteworthy that this theme appears in much of Melville’s other fiction and poetry as well. In “The Encantadas,” a series of sketches about the Galapagos Islands, Melville addresses the authority theme from a

different perspective. In the seventh sketch, focusing on Charles' Isle, Melville tells the story of freedom fighters, fighting against the Spanish "dog king," a dictator in possession of twenty loyal attack dogs, thus earning him his moniker. While the freedom fighters are ultimately successful in overthrowing the dictator, they soon fall into the same pattern as the dog king before them, becoming tyrant dictators, abusers of authority. In his Civil War poems, particularly the poem entitled "The House-Top," Melville portrays the reaction of the people to the Draft Laws, which allowed wealthy Northerners to avoid the draft by paying a fee to the government or hiring a substitute who would enter military service for them. The passing of such a law, a clear abuse of authority, culminates in protesting riots, which the poem's narrator observes in horror. While the speaker maintains a certain distaste for the rioting, what he finds equally, if not more, disturbing is the use of force by the state militia to quell the riot. This use of force is clearly shown to represent a clear abuse of authority on the part of the government. In *Pierre*, Melville's seventh novel, Pierre Glendenning's rebellious, impulsive behaviors are largely the result of his discovery that his late Father, the overshadowing authority figure in his life, committed immoral and disagreeable actions. In a similar situation, Melville's *Redburn* portrays a man coming to the realization that his father's authority is not what he had thought it to be. Relying on his father's guidebook to lead him on his trip across the ocean to Liverpool, Redburn sees that his father's guide to the city has completely lost currency, and he ultimately must abandon it as a result. In many respects, these responses can be characterized as rebellious in nature, but Melville, in all his works, is skeptical of authority, whether the authority of the past, the father, the State, or the Captain.

It is clear in Melville's fiction that he has made the theme of authority, regardless of what form it takes, quite apparent. Canaday notes that his choosing the life of a common sailor often

made him subject to the "harsh discipline of the sea" (5). Undoubtedly, this subjection certainly served as an inspiration to Melville as he composed his first novel *Typee* as well as his subsequent works of fiction, similar themes and notions revealing themselves even in Melville's final work, *Billy Budd.* While the presence of authority as a theme is practically irrefutable, what Melville has to say about it is contrarily the subject of considerable debate within the Melville community.

This study, in addition to highlighting the appearances of authority as a theme within a selection of Melville's sea-faring works, will also demonstrate the perspective from which Melville approached authority when incorporating it as a narrative element. Melville scholars tend to view Melville's work as a commentary of either acceptance or resistance to authority; I will show that it is both. While earlier Melvillian works such as *Typee* tend to present authority and the figures that embody it in a negative light, as Melville's anthology continues, this negative focus gradually begins to shift, creating a great deal of ambiguity in his message. Melville's criticism of authority remains constant throughout his fiction, however; for Melville, any form of stringent hierarchical power structure can lead to abuses of authority and inhumane treatment of those subjected to that authority. His view of authority figures, in contrast, becomes more sympathetic by the end of his anthology. While consistently criticizing the leadership ability of those possessing authority in his work, Melville gradually shows a growing sympathy for authority figures such as Captain Ahab and Captain Vere.

Chapter 1: *Typee*: Initial Exploration of Authority as a Thematic Element

When exploring authority as a theme in the works of Melville, *Typee,* Melville's first work of fiction, is an excellent starting point. Often being considered more reflective of his own experience at sea than later works, Melville's earlier works (*Typee, Oomo, Redburn, Mardi*, etc.) often address his concerns and beliefs on social issues and conditions. They also feature the inclusion of a captain who serves as the figurehead of Melville's objections and frustrations. In the case of Melville's first work, *Typee,* we see a prime example of this in the form of Captain Vangs, who, while not being prominently featured in the majority of the novel, is very crucial to the development of the plot and the unfolding of events in the narrative.

Chapter 4 of the novel opens with the protagonist's striking statement that he'd decided to "risk…fortunes among the savages of the island (rather) than to endure another voyage on board the Dolly" (20). This decision is against the contract he has signed pledging his loyalty to the purpose of the ship and submitting to the authority of its officers. It is clear that Tommo does not take this contract lightly; he comments that he was bound to fulfill the agreement to which he had committed himself (21). While it appears that Tommo is aware of the serious violation he'd be committing by abandoning the *Dolly*, he is nonetheless committed to desertion. He cites his reason for this as the overbearing abuse of authority on the part of the ship's captain, of whom Melville writes, "The usage on board of her was tyrannical; the sick had been inhumanly neglected; the provisions had been doled out in scanty allowance; and her cruises were unreasonably protracted. The captain was the author of these abuses; it was vain to think that he would either remedy them, or alter his conduct, which was arbitrary and violent in the extreme (21)." Melville further notes that any complaint issued to the captain is met only by severe

punishment (typically in the form of violence) intended to silence those who would object to his abusive conduct.

While this situation serves as a necessary aspect of the plot in setting up Tommo's experiences with the Typee, it also does much to convey Melville's displeasure with authority and authority figures. With his vivid description of Captain Vangs's tyrannical behaviors, Tommo justifies his desertion of the ship, stating "But in all contracts, if one party fail to perform his share of the compact, is not the other virtually absolved from his liability?" This indicates that Tommo feels that he has been betrayed by authority and, as a result, has every right to similarly abandon his obligations to that authority. While Melville recognizes that it is the legal right of the captain to rule as he wishes, it is impractical for Tommo to view his situation legally as they are years of travel away from any sort of structured society or a potential end to the voyage. As a result, desertion becomes the only source of relief from the suffering that he has been forced to endure (Canaday 11).

The notion that Melville would incorporate such ideas into *Typee*, a novel based upon his own first-hand experience, is itself very suggestive that Melville viewed authority negatively and admonished those who would abuse it. Canaday writes in his article that "the brief episode concerning Captain Vangs of the whaling ship *Dolly* indicates that from the beginning Melville was vitally concerned with the authority of the ship's master and particularly the abuse of it" (10). With such concern incorporated into the development of Tommo's departure from the Dolly, the reader may reasonably infer that Melville is deliberately affirming that Captain Vangs' authority is not to be trusted and may be disregarded should the need arise.

Melville's criticism of authority did not end with the simple disparagement of one man's tyranny, however; *Typee* quickly evolves into a criticism of society's abuse of authority as it

attempts to force itself upon others. Another target of Melville's criticism of those who would abuse authority is revealed in the suffocating manifestation of religious authority on the islands. The authority imposed by church and state is addressed in *Typee* through references of "bringing civilization to Polynesia." Canaday notes that "Wherever the narrator comments on this civilizing process, he sees the results as adverse" (11). One particular instance in which Melville directly reprimands the intrusive activity of religious authority comes in chapter 17 when he references the degradation of the Hawaiian Islands that occurs after the arrival of the missionaries. Noting the once "smiling and populous" islands, Tommo now describes them as "diseased, starving, and dying." His next statement is very telling of Melville's opinion of religious authority at the time: "The missionaries may seek to disguise the matter as they will, but the facts are inconvertible; and the devoutest Christian who visits that group with an unbiased mind, must go away mournfully asking—'Are these, alas! the fruits of twenty-five years of enlightening?'" (124). This description of the missionaries clearly implies great displeasure on the part of Melville with religious authority, especially relating to the intrusion of missionaries upon other cultures. Canaday comments on the missionaries that "The remarks (of Tommo) are interpolated into the narrative to protest the authority of a civilization that imposes unwanted and unneeded standards on an alien people" (12). Nicholas Lawrence further elaborates on this in his article, writing, "uncivilized people are immediately contaminated and degraded by contact with white civilization" (62). With *Typee*, Melville constructs a scenario in which the blame for the negative effects of colonization lies primarily with those who lead colonization, possessing power and authority, using it to dominate other people and societies.

It is apparent that Melville was acutely aware of the dangers that abused authority could cause to both the individual and to society as a whole, and while direct criticism of this is

prominently displayed throughout *Typee*, there is also a degree of criticism found in Tommo's comparisons between the society of the Typee and his own. Tommo exhibits a captivated point of view as he describes the society of the tribesmen, noting that the islanders live together "with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled…in the most select, refined, and pious associations of mortals in Christendom" (200). Canaday writes on this, "The fact that the Marquesans lived in peace and harmony with the persuasion of custom serving as an adequate substitute for the coercion of formal authority probably most impressed Melville" (12); much like his own first-hand experience with such people, so did Melville also craft the Typee tribe in the novel, that is, a perfectly functioning society that works without the corrupting force of authority, choosing rather to adhere to the customs of its people. By creating such a society in his fiction, Melville insists that authority is not a necessary facet for the existence of a society, almost insisting on the opposite.

Oftentimes in the novel, it seems as though Melville invites readers to develop a preference for the islanders' manner of civilization over their own, even though Tommo himself cannot quite arrive at such a conclusion. Some would argue that this inability of Tommo to remain in the society of the Typee serves to illustrate that man cannot function in a society without the presence of authority to guide him. However, there are a number of factors that must be taken into consideration in the analysis of such an assumption.

The first of these is the overall tone of the novel, which has been shown to be clearly anti-authoritarian. The reader must then question why Melville would spend the entirety of the novel building within the reader's mind an image of authority as a tyrannical device used by the corrupt to control those below them only to destroy that image with Tommo's "escape" back to civilization. The answer, of course, is that such a thing wouldn't make sense; the reader must

note that the narration of the story is delivered in the form of a recollection from Tommo, and in spite of his sudden need for departure from the islands, he still reminisces about Typee society with admiration.

Another consideration that the reader must take into account is the feelings associated with Tommo's departure. Tommo himself demonstrates varying degrees of eagerness in both his departure from the *Dolly* and his departure from the islands. The reader will notice that while he speaks only negatively of life aboard the ship, he speaks rather highly, overall, of life with the Typee. His departures from both representations of society are reflected according to these feelings: while Tommo jumps ship at the first available opportunity, his departure from the Typee is filled with regret up until Mow-Mow attempts to prevent his leaving.

The islanders themselves are portrayed as saddened by Tommo's departure as well. The tears of his girlfriend, Fayaway, and servant, Kory-Kory, are both described as instilled with longing and regret, and the Chief of the Typee tribe, Marheyo, repeatedly utters the only two English words that Tommo has taught him (*Home* and *Mother)* to express his sorrow at Tommo's departure. He nonetheless orders that Tommo be allowed to leave the islands amicably with no resistance. While the reader is tempted to focus on the rogue attempts of Mow-Mow to keep him from leaving the islands, the tribesmen overall do not abuse, force, or attempt to control Tommo as Captain Vangs does aboard the *Dolly*. Lawerence notes in his article that "Tommo's eagerness to return home less reflects a hostile Us/Them binary than do the acts of violence that consecrate his departure" (63). Melville constructs a scenario in the latter half of *Typee* in which Tommo encounters a very different type of authority than the hostile and abusive authority he encounters under Captain Vangs. While he is ultimately unable to continue living in the new society he's encountered, Tommo demonstrates a certain reverence for the leadership of

the Marquesan tribes, his close relationship with Marheyo being the foremost example. In creating such a contrast in the relationship between Tommo and the two leaders, Melville demonstrates that while the abuse of authority is a critical problem with society, there is still hope that, with leadership that possesses the ability to effectively exercise authority, authorial abuse is a problem that can be corrected under the right circumstances.

This brief analysis of *Typee* establishes a strong precedent for the way which Melville addresses the issue of authority in his work. While not always at the forefront of the story, abuses of authority are nearly always present in the Melville narrative, subjecting various victims, typically the narrators, to objectionable behaviors and treatment from those characters which represent authority. While his early work presents very one-dimensional, authoritarian characters which the common sailor, the everyman, must endure and survive, Melville's later works, namely *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*, present authority figures with much more depth and complication, which influence their ability to command and do so effectively. Ultimately, while Melville writes about the many abuses that often occur when authority is granted to a leader undeserving of it, illustrating the magnitude of its damaging effects through its effects on those subjected to that leader's authority, he later introduces other complicating factors into the authority equation, presenting leaders who fall into a grey area on the black and white scale with which his earlier works present authority.

Chapter 2: *White-Jacket*: Demonstrating Contrasting Authority

While *Typee* was a very successful novel by the standards of the day, Melville's *White-Jacket* (1850) did not nearly rise to the success of its early predecessor. The novel was extremely popular, however, with one particular audience: the officers of the United States Navy, whom the novel fiercely and readily condemned. Soon after the release of Melville's fifth novel, several responses were written criticizing it, condemning nearly every aspect of the work. One of the most notable of these responses, published only four months after the novel's release (a timely response for the day), was written by Rear Admiral Thomas Selfridge, who both viciously and meticulously attacks Melville's writing at every angle. The opening remarks of the reply do well to capture the rigor of Selfridge's attack:

> We have never known a work, professing as this does, to give a true picture of men and things, in which was to be found so many misnomers, misstatements, and inconsistencies – so many improbabilities, false premises, and false conclusions – so much of the marvelous and absurd. (125)

Selfridge's vicious introduction serves as an effective lead into a precision attack on every possible inaccuracy, discrepancy, and inconsistency the Admiral could find throughout the entirety of the text. To illustrate an example of such precision, Selfridge cites Melville's use of the word "Selvagee" as an incorrect term, writing that "in reality, [the instrument] known by the name of nipper – here he uses the qualifying word in place of the true term" (127). Selfridge also ridicules Melville's use of the word for a broad pendant "bougee" instead of "bergee," which he cites as piece of medical equipment.

For a work of fiction to face such scrutiny over such small, technical details in 1850, when such information was hardly readily available, certainly seems to be, if not excessive, then

at least curious behavior from a high ranking naval officer. The fact of the matter is that such small details were hardly relevant, and were not the true target of Selfridge's attack. To provoke such a relentless and meticulous attack, in spite of being a mere work of fiction, Melville's work must have contained ideas which posed a serious threat to the status quo that was naval life in the mid-19th century.

What Selfridge and other naval officers recognized in *White-Jacket* was a critique of the traditions and regulations that had long established the authority with which they controlled their navy. If such criticisms were found legitimate (which they eventually were), then the legitimacy of a number of military practices such as corporal punishment could be in danger of abolishment. This would have been a grave concern to men like Selfridge because of the degree of security these long-standing traditions provided in terms of maintaining their authority over their men. Selfridge is incapable of understanding how a commander may lead his men without the looming threat of corporal punishment to enforce discipline. He argues, "that now, it is the fear of the lash that incites many to do their duty, and prevents hundreds from becoming skulkers – that without the certainty of immediate punishment, anarchy and insubordination would prevail, instead of peace, efficiency and order" (138). While Selfridge's concerns appear valid, his sincerity is merely the result of his not understanding the distinction between possessing authority and possessing the leadership to effectively use authority. Melville, in stark contrast, sees effective command and corporal authority as two unrelated entities, the former of which maintains order through respect and inspiration and the latter which rules through fear and oppression.

In Melville's view, naval regulation and hierarchy of command aboard a military vessel are the root cause of abuses of power and authority, and it is these regulatory bodies which Melville targets with his criticisms in *White-Jacket*. He does so in part through the structure of

his narrative, which Priscilla Allen describes as a "man-of-war microcosm" (32). This microcosm is simply a portrayal of the ship itself as the boundary of existence, particularly from the perspective of the common sailor. While officers, those with authority, are able to leave the ship, recording various adventures of foreign lands, the ordinary sailors are largely relegated to the confines of the ship, with the occasional land excursion, which Allen notes was "usually spent in drunken oblivion" (32). Essentially, "the officer narrated mainly his travels, expanded with all sorts of geographical and scientific data on the places he visited…the world was his subject. The seaman spoke mainly of his life on the ship; it was his world" (33). Because the perspective of the narrator, a common sailor aboard the *USS Neversink*, is subjected to the limitations of the microcosm, it includes an examination and explanation of every minute detail of the daily operations of the ship. This examination, in turn, affords Melville the opportunity to conduct a critical study of authoritative positions, an opportunity which he takes advantage of at every possible opportunity. Every event of significance throughout the lengthy narrative is directly connected to a character possessing authority.

The three primary authority figures of *White-Jacket* are Captain Claret, Doctor Cuticle, and Jack Chase. The two former of these possess authority bestowed upon them by naval hierarchy and law while Chase's authority is granted based upon his charismatic and inspirational dynamism, which earns the respect of both his fellow common sailors as well as that of his superiors. We only learn of these characters through their actions; this is primarily the result of the narrator's point of view as a common sailor, so rather than the reader being able to witness the deliberations and decision making processes experienced by authoritarians, we are confined to the "work" areas of the ship. As a result, examination of positions of power is conducted primarily through the lens of results rather than personal motivation or reasoning. This

approach is ideal for conducting a criticism of abusive authoritarians because it refuses to give authority a voice, instead relying solely on the pain, suffering, and humiliation of those affected by their decisions to pose opposition.

Relying on *White-Jacket*'s reactions to these characters and their actions, Melville is able to demonstrate that authority alone is not sufficient; quality leadership abilities are also required to make a successful authority figure. Melville also utilizes these reactions to propose that authority can be abused and that it must be resisted in such a scenario. The displayed contrast between effective leaders who inspire their men and ineffective ones who control their men is Melville's primary tool for achieving this goal.

Captain Claret, Melville's strongest medium for authority protest in *White-Jacket*, acquires and maintains his authority through two primary methods. The first of these are the rules and regulations pertaining to the United States Navy at that time. For example, The Articles of War, enacted in 1775, were largely unaltered until the abolishment of flogging in 1851. Hershel Parker, in his biography of Melville, notes that the Articles were read to a crew with the intention of "[terrifying] a 'novice' standing in bareheaded awe as the captain's clerk announced the specific grave offences for which a seaman might be punished" (263). Parker's explanation for one way in which these rules were implemented also provides insight into the second way in which Naval authority figures, like Captain Claret, are able to maintain order and discipline aboard their vessels: fear. A Naval commander maintained his authority by both the power granted him under the governing body of the Navy and through public punishment and humiliation suffered by those who would challenge his authority, thereby dissuading further misbehaviors. Article three of the regulations, for example, states:

> If any shall be heard to swear, curse or blaspheme the name of God, the Captain is strictly enjoined to punish them for every offence, by causing them to wear a wooden collar or some other shameful badge of distinction, for so long a time as he shall judge proper:-- If he be a commissioned officer he shall forfeit one shilling for each offence, and a warrant or inferior officer, six-pence: He who is guilty of drunkenness (if a seaman) shall be put in irons until he is sober, but if an officer, he shall forfeit two day's pay (Naval Historical Center).

Upon closer inspection of the regulations and punishments set by article three, it becomes clear that the purpose of the regulation is to dissuade even the most minor of disorderly behavior with harsh, perhaps unwarranted, punishment. Articles twenty-seven and twenty-nine both deem desertion and mutiny as acts punishable the most severe of punishments, death. There are listed also punishments for (more) minor infractions such as drinking, fighting, theft, and sleeping while on duty, all of which are punishable by court martial. Of particular importance to Melville, in the construction of Captain Claret's character, is article four, which gives the Captain of a Naval vessel the authority to administer lashes to (flog) any seaman under his command for any offense at his own discretion. The Article reads:

> No Commander shall inflict any punishment upon a seaman beyond twelve lashes upon his bare back with a cat of nine-tails; if the fault shall deserve a greater punishment, he is to apply to the Commander in Chief of the navy in order to the trying of him by a court martial, and in the mean time he may put him under confinement (Naval Historical Center).

Because article four gives the captain of the vessel the legal authority to administer flogging at his discretion, it would obviously be the most utilized punishment for committed offenses aboard

a Naval vessel and, consequently, is the most heavily criticized exercise of authority by Melville in *White-Jacket*.

Much of Melville's resistance to this particular exhibition of abusive authority originated with his own personal experience with it during the time he served aboard the United States Frigate, the *United States*, where he would witness, first hand, abusive corporal punishment at its worst. Parker recounts in his biography that "Melville reluctantly witnessed, all told, over a hundred and fifty floggings, each done according to 'regulations,'" over the course of his 382 days in service (262). Seven of these floggings witnessed occurred within just a few hours of Melville's initial arrival upon the ship, and while Melville left no direct account of what he saw during these public "chastisements," *White-Jacket* provides a level of detail which was undoubtedly influenced by Melville's own experience in being subjected to this form of abusive authority. He recounts the inescapability of witnessing floggings in chapter 33 of the novel, stating

> However much you may desire to absent yourself from the scene that ensues, yet behold it you must; or, at least, stand near it you must; for the regulations enjoin the attendance of the entire ship's company, from the corpulent Captain himself to the smallest boy who strikes the bell. (134-35)

With such a statement, we can infer a great deal about Melville's own opinions of distaste with not only the traumatic nature of flogging itself, but also the abusive regulatory bodies that administer it. First and foremost, Melville interjects that it is the regulations themselves that are at fault, requiring all aboard the ship to witness the traumatic act. He also refers to the captain, who is also subject to these regulations, as corpulent, implying considerable distaste for his authoritative position. This distaste for the captain is due to the fact that he is the one who must

initiate the enforcement of these regulations, and thus, the administering of corporal punishment, making his required attendance his own doing. Also by describing the captain as "corpulent," Melville implies a "padded" lavishness with which the captain lives and separates himself from the rest of the ship's crew.

Melville attributes the existence of such a gap in status and living conditions to the naval authoritative hierarchy established by the regulations of the Navy or, simply, a higher authority. Very early in the novel, Melville goes to considerable lengths to note and describe the hierarchies aboard a naval vessel. Of particular note is the way in which Melville advocates for the existence of rules and regulations aboard the ship. He comments "Were it not for these regulations a man-of-war's crew would be nothing but a mob, more ungovernable stripping the canvas in a gale than Lord George Gordon's tearing down the loft house of Lord Mansfield" (9). This is further evidence that authority itself is not the target of Melville's criticism, but the abuse of authority, such as that of the tyrannical Captain Vangs and the corpulent Captain Claret, along with those regulations which allow them to abuse their authority.

While Melville understood the need for governing bodies to prevent utter chaos, especially aboard the isolated nation that was a ship at sea, he does criticize those regulations and hierarchical structures which allow for the abuse of authority and mistreatment of those subjected to it. In describing the hierarchy of the ship, Melville most importantly notes that "every man of a frigate's five hundred strong, knows his own special place and is infallibly found there. He sees nothing else, attends to nothing else, and will stay there till grim death or epaulette orders him away" (8). This statement is of particular importance as Melville compares the absolute nature of a grim death with the authority that officers maintain over their crew. This synonymous relationship is further reinforced when he criticizes the insignificance of a seaman's

life compared to the needs of an officer. An officer's authority is supreme; he may order a seaman away from his post and to his death, placing the crewmember's life in the officer's hands, a degree of authority with which Melville was most uncomfortable.

It is, however, with this supreme authority and the assumed necessity for its existence that abusive authority figures such as the fictional Captain Claret or the real-life Admiral Selfridge condone their abusive practices, flogging chief amongst them. In *White-Jacket*, however, Melville is well prepared for such a defense. Seemingly anticipating such negative feedback from military leaders like Selfridge, Melville has prepared in his novel an illustration which supports the need for quality leadership rather than tyrannical and abusive control. He writes in response to the navy's defense: "You swear that, without the lash, no armed ship can be kept in suitable discipline. Be it proved to you officers, and stamped upon your forehead, that herein you are utterly wrong" (147). His alternative is then revealed through a description of the command of one Lord Collingswood, an English captain who did not practice flogging to maintain order aboard his ship. He instead relied on "the influence wrought by a powerful brain, and a determined, intrepid spirit over such a miscellaneous rabble." Again, Melville places leadership and authority in two separate categories, one which is bestowed and inherited and one which is earned through achievement and character.

Captain Claret, of the *Neversink*, demonstrates the exact opposite qualities presented by the account of Collingswood. Claret rules with the position given him over all others aboard the ship, and when that authority is threatened in any way, because he lacks the leadership abilities of a Lord Collingswood, Claret chooses instead to rule by fear. White-Jacket is prosecuted in the novel specifically because he represents such a threat to Claret, even though he means to do nothing of the sort. Because he was mistakenly not at the proper station when the order was

given, he was technically challenging his commanding officer's authority by disobeying him. White-Jacket had also previously threatened the captain by not adhering to old naval customs. He notes that it was the custom to touch one's hat whenever speaking to the captain of the ship, but, because White-Jacket is inexperienced, and the Articles of War read to him when he boarded do not require adherence to such a custom, he has no way of knowing he should have done so until it is too late. He comments: "I had never had the dangerous honor of a personal interview with Captain Claret. He quickly noticed my omission of the homage usually rendered him, and instinct told me, that to a certain extent, it set his heart against me" (279). In this particular instance, the threatened Captain Claret, lacking the leadership ability to deal with the situation in any other manner, must resort to administering lashes as a means of saving face and maintaining his position of authority. We must also consider Captain Claret's character in this regard as a man so conceited and pretentiously demanding that he would require others to place a hand on their hats before being allowed to address him. This clearly illustrates a degree of insecurity on the part of Claret, and offers some explanation about his predisposition to administer lashes to maintain face.

Melville's portrayal of Captain Claret's deficiencies of leadership is not limited to his grudge against White-Jacket. The "corpulent" captain is given complete authority aboard his vessel, an authority that he abuses in numerous ways. White-Jacket comments on many instances in which Claret not only unnecessarily abuses the authority bestowed by his position, but also causes his crew to suffer needlessly. Claret compromises the safety of the crew in chapter 5 of the novel when he orders Lieutenant Blink to board a Peruvian military vessel, a sloop of war, to kidnap an officer he suspects is one of his men who has deserted. Melville comments on the reaction of the crew:

> All hands were aghast- What? when a piping hot peace was between the United States and Peru, to send an armed body on board a Peruvian sloop of war, and seize one of its officers in broad daylight?- Monstrous infraction of the Law of Nations!...But Captain Claret must be obeyed. (18)

In this instance, Claret abuses his authority and supersedes the "Law of Nations," an authority which is higher than his own, on a whim. While Claret's suspicion that the Peruvian officer is one of his men ultimately proves to be correct, Claret's willingness to instigate an act of war without adequate cause demonstrates his willingness to abuse his authority at a substantial risk.

In the chapter "A Man-of-War Race," Captain Claret's arrogance is further exemplified when he forces all men aboard the *Neversink* to assist in a race with a British ship. Melville writes that "All hands being called, they were now made use of by Captain Claret as make weights, to trim the ship, scientifically to her most approved bearings" (272). Melville's use of the phrase "made use of" appropriately describes Captain Claret's relationship with his crew, completely dehumanizing them as parts of the ship; this is reinforced with other cold mechanical language such as "make-weights" and "approved bearings." While the ship itself remains personified with the designation "she," the crew are designated as mechanical "cogs" in a machine, with no human traits and with the value of dust to Claret and the other officers aboard the ship.

Melville portrays the other officers aboard the *Neversink* in much the same way as Claret: as abusers of authority with no regard for the well-being of the men they command. In chapter 46 of the novel, Melville critiques this form of abusive authority on many fronts, many of which are not contained within the microcosm of the ship. While at port with other ships in the same squadron, Naval vessels would often participate in mock exercises in unison, all under the

"direction" of the Commodore who, while actually having little to do with the exercise, is content to sit, idly taking the credit for the demonstration he watches. Melville writes:

> But even as so potent an emperor and Caesar to boot as the great Don of Germany, Charles the Fifth, was used to divert himself in his dotage by watching the gyrations and springs and cogs of a long row of clocks, even so does an elderly Commodore while away his leisure in harbor…causing the various spars of all the ships under his command to be "braced," "topped," and "cock billed" in concert while the Commodore himself sits, something like King Canute, on an arm-chest on the poop of his flag ship. (194)

Here, Melville demonstrates that abuses in authority are not limited to the confines of the ship, but exist even with the Commodore, the head of the naval hierarchy. By comparing the sailors conducting exercises aboard the ships of the fleet to the springs and cogs of a lengthy row of clocks, we see Melville again using cold and mechanical language to place emphasis on the minimal value placed on the lives and well-being of the common sailor. To the commodore, much like the Captain Claret, he is only concerned with his own amusement as he watches the "concert" being conducted for him; the potential for danger is not even a consideration.

This lack of consideration for the common sailor remains present amongst even the lower ranked officers aboard the *Neversink* and other ships in the fleet. During the exercises for the Commodore, an incident occurs in which a sailor, Baldy, is coaxed into jumping onto a sail by a First Lieutenant, resulting in his falling and being horribly injured. Melville writes of the injured man that "He was picked up for dead, and carried below to the surgeon. His bones seemed like those of a man broken on the wheel, and no one thought he would survive the night" (196). Most important to consider of this incident, however, are the motivations of the Lieutenant to provoke

and taunt Baldy into nearly fatally injuring himself. Having instilled within him from Captain Claret the desire to perform well in the exercises before the Commodore, the Lieutenant is willing to risk the lives of the sailors he commands in order to gain an advantage over the other ships. Melville comments that it was, indeed, rare to hear of a military vessel returning home without having lost crew members from similar situation; he additionally makes note of the comparatively fewer incidents of such a nature that occur aboard merchant vessels lacking the Military hierarchical structure and authoritative tendencies of Naval vessels. This illustrates the tendencies toward the abuse of authority in a military setting, even in peace time. Melville bluntly describes the reality of this situation at the conclusion of White-Jacket's account of the incident:

> Why mince the matter? The death of most of the man-of-war's men lies at the door of the souls of those officers, who, while safely standing on the deck themselves, scruple not to sacrifice an immortal man or two, in order to show off the excelling discipline of the ship. And thus do the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the commodore on the poop may be glorified. (197)

Melville again reiterates the superior value placed on the authority of the officers over the safety of the men they command. Melville asserts that, in its abused state, authority even surpasses the risk of death in terms of importance, and we see this illustrated here where death or debilitating injury await a man at the hands of an officer's whim.

The chapters involving medical practices on the ship, particularly those entitled "A Consultation of Man-of-War Surgeons" and "The Operation," explore abuses of authority in a much different context. Focusing on the exploits of the surgeon of the *Neversink*, Dr. Cuticle, these chapters also highlight how the arrogance of an accomplished and knowledgeable man can

lead to abuses in authority which result in horrendous consequences for those subjected to it. Melville describes Dr. Cuticle as being an honorary member of the most noteworthy and renowned colleges of surgeons in both Europe and America. He also notes of Cuticle: "Nor was he at all blind to the dignity of his position…if the reputation he enjoyed was deserved. He had the name of being the foremost surgeon in the Navy, a gentleman of remarkable science, and a veteran practitioner" (248). Given his extensive background of accolade and achievement, it is clear that Cuticle holds a position of the highest medical authority, even amongst others in his field.

Cuticle demonstrates abuse of the authority assumed by this position on a number of occasions. In chapter 62 of *White-Jacket*, he disingenuously requests a consultation with the surgeons of neighboring ships for a man who has been shot in the leg. Melville comments on the routine nature of this practice, stating that "it seems customary for the Surgeon of the fleet, when any important operation in his department is on the anvil, and there is nothing to absorb professional attention from it, to invite his brother surgeons…to a ceremonious consultation" (252). It soon becomes clear that Cuticle's true intention is not to consult with his peers, but rather to exhibit his confidence in his own knowledge and authority and for the other surgeons to witness and recognize that authority. In his address to the arriving surgeons, Cuticle states:

> In fact, there can be no doubt that the wound is incurable, and that amputation is the only recourse. But, gentlemen, I find myself placed in a very delicate predicament. I assure you I feel no personal anxiety to perform the operation. I desire your advice. Once more, let me say, that I feel no personal anxiety whatever to use the knife. (252)

The obviously suggestive nature of this passage demonstrates that not only does Cuticle have little interest in the professional opinions of his colleagues, but also that he isn't seeking advice at all; recognition is what he desires, and he has gathered his peers with the intention of obtaining their acknowledgment of his authority—a move of pure arrogance. It is clear by his frequent assertions of his willingness to use the knife that Cuticle has already determined that he will amputate his patient's leg. Cuticle's reaction to the opinions of dissent from the other surgeons further exemplifies his abuse of authority.

Upon inspection of the patient's wound and general condition, Cuticle seeks validation from each of the four surgeons he's called aboard the *Neversink*. Amongst the three senior-most surgeons, Cuticle is met with unfavorable replies. Surgeon Bandage notes that while the wound is serious "I have seen more dangerous cases" (253). Cuticle's notable displeasure toward Bandage for his disparity is shown as he addresses the next surgeon: "'Surgeon Wedge…be pleased to give *your* opinion; and let it be definitive I entreat:' this was said with a severe glance toward Bandage" (253). While his words demonstrate Cuticle's frustration at his authority being challenged, his "severe glance" is most revealing of displeasure.

After receiving unfavorable responses from three of the four surgeons in spite of his attempts to manipulate them into giving him positive feedback, Cuticle turns to the youngest surgeon, Patella, in the hopes of taking advantage of the surgeon's youth to elicit at least one definitively favorable response. Melville describes the state of mind of the young Patella:

> Now Patella was the youngest of the company, a modest man, filled with a profound reverence for the science of Cuticle, and desirous of gaining his good opinion, yet not wishing to commit himself altogether by a decided reply, though,

> like Surgeon Sawyer, in his own mind he might have been clearly against the operation. (254)

Desiring to remain in Cuticle's good graces, Patella allows himself to be intimidated by Cuticle's authority, stating that while the patient seems to have a strong constitution, amputation remains a viable treatment for the illness. He also goes to great lengths to flatter Cuticle, further establishing his motives for dissent from his colleagues:

> the patient seem to have a strong constitution, he might rally as it is, and by your scientific treatment, Mr. Surgeon of the Fleet" – bowing – "be entirely made whole, without risking amputation. Still, it is a very critical case, and amputation may be indispensable; and if it is to be performed, there ought to be no delay whatever. That is my view of the case, Mr. Surgeon of the Fleet. (254)

While the flattering of Dr. Patella is made quite obvious, his actual advice on the situation is hardly definitive. For the entire first half of the passage, Patella asserts that it's entirely possible that the wounded man will make a full recovery without need for an amputation, but, during the latter half of the same address, Patella gives in to the coaxing of Dr. Cuticle, essentially authorizing him to do as he pleases without delay.

Dr. Cuticle is quick to react to Patella's ever so slightest of validations: "Surgeon Patella, then gentlemen," said Cuticle, turning around triumphantly, "is clearly of the opinion that amputation should be immediately performed" (254). Utilizing the half-hearted acquiescence of the youngest and most inexperienced surgeon, Cuticle ignores the advice of his more experienced colleagues. Ultimately the amputation occurs in spite of Melville's clear portrayal of it as unnecessary. This clearly excessive action occurs both because of Dr. Cuticle's arrogance and willingness to abuse the authority that he is afforded by his position as well as the lack of

willingness on the part of his colleagues to overtly challenge that authority. Melville demonstrates with Dr. Cuticle that, left unchallenged, abusive authority can and will only continue to thrive.

With the earlier example of Lord Collingswood, the British commander who did not use the lash to command his men, Melville illustrates abuses in authority through comparison. While this comparison does well to demonstrate the difference between authority possessed and leadership to command, Melville includes in the pages of *White-Jacket* a more immediate, "living" example of quality leadership, a foil for the corpulent Captain Claret. Jack Chase is an ideal example of the charisma necessary for an effective leader, and this is made more apparent by the frequent occurrence of incidents contrasting the leadership ability of both him and Captain Claret.

One such incident occurs in chapter 26 of the novel when the *Neversink* is caught in a severe storm near Cape Horn. With the situation grave, Claret bursts from his cabin shouting "Hard *up* the helm!" Chase, the officer of the deck, immediately issues contradictory orders, shouting "Damn you…hard down – hard down, I say, and be damned to you" (106)! White-Jacket observes in surprise the willingness of Jack Chase to not only disobey Claret's orders and challenge his authority, but also assume authority of his own and issue counter orders. "Contrary orders! but Mad Jack's were obeyed," Melville writes of the outcome of the sudden conflict. The significance of this event and its outcome has little to do with the knowledge base of seamanship that each of the men possesses, but rather serves as a reflection of the effective leadership abilities possessed by each of the men. Because the men choose to accept Chase's authority over Captain Claret's, they demonstrate a degree of confidence in his ability to lead while showing a lack of confidence in the captain's.

Jack Chase is presented from his debut in *White-Jacket* as an inspirational figure amongst the men. Melville writes of him that "no man ever had a better heart or a bolder. He was loved by the seamen and admired by the officers; and even when the Captain spoke to him, it was with a slight air of respect" (13). There are a number of qualities that make Jack an effective leader. His competence and knowledge both prove integral parts of his leadership ability. He possesses the ability to command men as well as to set a good example for them. Everything about the man creates an aura of competence around him, and, while no single one of these qualities is sufficient to create an authority figure with effective leadership, the combination of these elements ultimately attains that result.

One way in which Chase is able to maintain such rapport with the sailors aboard the *Neversink* is his humility which, in addition to inspiring the men, also allows him to make a connection with them at the personal level. For example, in his story to the men about a battle with a Turkish Admiral, Jack is very careful to minimize his role in the affair, noting "It was the Admiral of the fleet – God Almighty – who directed the shot that dismasted the Turkish Admiral; I only pointed the gun" (319). Jack achieves a number of goals with this story. He inspires the men by emphasizing the importance of each individual position aboard the vessel. He also encourages the men to remain subservient to the authority of the officers above them by giving the admiral credit for the victory even though it was he who made the vital shot that destroyed the masthead, a task requiring considerable skill. While he refers to the admiral as God Almighty, seemingly in a very sarcastic, disingenuous manner, he nonetheless encourages loyalty to one's officers in spite of their abuse and arrogance.

Often in his novels, *White-Jacket* included, Melville presents characters who view their position aboard the ship as simply a job, a means to an end. Melville himself joined the Navy as

a way to return to America, and we see this reflected in White-Jacket, who joins for the same reason. A very important aspect of Jack Chase's leadership ability are his inspirational speaking skills, which instill within the sailors a degree of pride in their occupations. Chase places particular value on their serving aboard a naval vessel as opposed to a whaling vessel:

> I have sailed with lords and marquises for captains; and the King of the Two Sicilies has passed me, as I here stood up at my gun. Bah! you are full of the forepeak and the forecastle; you are only familiar with Burtons and Billy-tackles; your ambition never mounted above pig-killing! which, in my poor opinion, is the proper phrase for whaling! (16)

Through his ridicule of whaling vessels, Chase instills pride and a sense of purpose within the other sailors aboard the *Neversink*. This is important because maintaining order and authority aboard the isolated microcosm of the ship requires much more than simply possessing such qualities. A leader must also inspire his men to follow him. Jack Chase provides such qualities, and while he is not the captain of the ship, Captain Claret is well aware of his value in this respect. We see Claret's recognition of Chase's value when he's captured after deserting the *Neversink*. Rather than lashing or executing Chase, which the law permits him to do, Claret instead orders that he be reinstated. He chooses to do this is because Claret is fully aware of his own deficiencies as a leader and he knows that he can utilize Chase to make up for his own lack of leadership ability.

Chase's inspirational abilities reach beyond the men who serve under him; an exemplary, professional sailor, Chase also holds the respect of the officers aboard the *Neversink*. In addition to the incident in which Captain Claret pardons him for deserting, Chase also convinces the

captain to annul White-Jacket's sentence to flogging by speaking on his behalf. He also advocates for a liberty for the other men while the ship is in port.

In examination of authority figures in *White-Jacket*, presented to us are both characters who abuse their authority and those who lack authority but demonstrate a remarkable capacity to lead. The effects of being subjected to each of these are most visible through the relationship between authority figures and those that they lead. In the case of this novel, White-Jacket himself serves as the representation of the common sailor, the model for observing the effects of abused authority upon the "sea-commoners" or "the people" (28). In fulfilling this essential role, White-Jacket becomes a relatable character, an essential trait for Melville's audience to truly grasp the harmful and damaging effects of abused authority as well as its alternatives.

It is notable, however, that the view of White-Jacket as a relatable character is not one shared by all. Debate of intent is a prevalent theme in any discussion of Melville, and *White-Jacket* is no exception to the pattern. In his article "Antidemocratic Emphasis in *White-Jacket*," Larry Reynolds argues against the notion of White-Jacket as a relatable character, noting that "when he views them (his peers) realistically, however, he sees their depravity, vulgarity, and ignorance and feels a sense of superiority toward them" (15). While Reynolds's argument holds validity, White-Jacket does desire to be better than average or common; his desire to be different from what he is not does not change the fact that he is, nonetheless, a common sailor. He shares the same hardships and is subjected to the same abuses of authority as the rest of the crew.

Both abusive authority and exemplary leadership are presented as forces affecting the individual. In examination of the influential effects of quality leadership, Melville presents Jack Chase, and he demonstrates the positive effect that such a leader has upon his men through his description of White-Jacket's unquestionable loyalty and admiration toward him. In much the

same way, Melville demonstrates the harmful effects of the abuse of authority through Captain Claret's influence on White-Jacket, leaving his opinion of the authoritarian very bitter and negative.

Melville's ultimate goal in this approach, praising the leadership of Chase while condemning the abuse of Claret and Cuticle, is to establish the desire for change. Because of its oppressive nature, authority (particularly abusive authority) leads those subjected to it to question and rebel against it. True leadership, on the other hand, yields devotion from those who follow.

Chapter 3: *Moby-Dick*: The Use of Charisma to Manipulate

Published only a year after *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick* (1851) serves, in many ways, as a continuation of Melville's commentary on authority and leadership. In Captain Ahab, Melville presents the reader with an authority figure very different from those of his previous works. Like Captain Vangs and Captain Claret, Ahab has been given authority over both his men and the *Pequod*. Unlike these captains, however, Ahab possesses the ideal leadership abilities of Jack Chase, making him charismatic and earning him nearly complete loyalty from his men. An examination of how Ahab's superior leadership relates to the well-being of the *Pequod's* crew, however, demonstrates that Melville's portrayal of authority and leadership in *Moby-Dick* is significantly different from that of *White-Jacket*. He achieves this by complicating previously established notions of abusive authority and leadership as separate, conflicting entities by presenting the reader with a captain possessing the leadership abilities of Jack Chase, but applying those abilities in pursuit of an insane, suicidal goal. With *Moby-Dick*, Melville establishes that authority, even when paired with quality leadership, while desirable, can still be damaging to those subjected to it if used by a leader with bad intentions. An effective leader, then, requires not only authority itself and quality leadership abilities, but also the morality necessary to utilize those abilities.

In *Moby-Dick*, the leadership aspect of authority is Melville's primary focus. Unlike Vangs and Claret, who rely on hierarchies established by military and naval law and fear of punishment to lead their men, Ahab leads by a different means; he utilizes a leadership that does not rely on the power that authority grants him, but rather on his ability to relate to the crew of the *Pequod*. Ahab is able to manipulate the will of his men so that they view his desires, quests, and goals as their own. In addition to his focus on leadership over establishment in terms of

authority, Melville also places a notable emphasis on the men who choose to follow that leadership. The responsibility for the *Pequod's* disastrous end does not rest solely with the vengefully insane Captain Ahab; the crew who chooses to follow him without question must also be held accountable for allowing themselves to become subjected to Ahab's whims. An analysis of Ahab's leadership abilities paired with the crew's reaction to his charismatic persona demonstrate the potential for a precarious relationship between leaders and the led. This relationship often ends in tragic circumstances, as is ultimately the case for the *Pequod* and her crew.

The measure of effective leadership ability can be made, especially in the works of Melville, by the way in which those who serve under him react to his authority. In *Typee*, we see a relative lack of effectiveness in Captain Vangs' leadership when Tommo chooses to desert the ship rather than remain under the "tyrannical" usage of authority implemented by the captain. *White-Jacket* portrays the ineffectiveness of Captain Claret, who relies upon the hierarchy of naval authority and the fear of the lash to control his men. We see the lack of success in his methods exemplified by frequent criticisms from White-Jacket, Melville's representative of the common man. The willingness of the men to follow the orders of Jack Chase over Claret's executive orders further demonstrate his inability to effectively lead. It is with the aforementioned Jack Chase that we begin to recognize common ground with *Moby-Dick's* Captain Ahab.

In the previous examination of Chase, it was his ability to inspire the other men by being relatable and his refusal to rule through fear that made him an effective leader, even amongst his superiors. Many of these same qualities also appear in Ahab, who is initially introduced in the novel, not in physical appearance, but in description by the owners of the *Pequod*, Bildad and

Peleg. When informing Ishmael that he will not be permitted to see his captain until after the voyage is underway, Peleg speaks of Ahab: "He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen" (88). While this certainly creates a strong desire within Ishmael to meet his legendary captain, it also establishes the essence of Ahab's authority as very influential; Ahab's employers give Ishmael a strong first impression of his captain.

Bildad and Peleg do more than just introduce Ahab as a strong authority figure; they also portray him as human and relatable to his new subordinate:

> So good-bye to thee – and wrong not Captain Ahab, because he happens to have a wicked name. Besides, my boy, he has a wife – not three voyages wedded – a sweet, resigned girl. Think of that; by that sweet girl that old man has a child: hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? No, no, my lad; stricken, blasted if he be, Ahab has his humanities! (89)

In this selection of the text, Captain Ahab is permitted a luxury that few authority figures have previously been afforded in Melville's works, the perspective of humanity. Captain Vangs and Captain Claret, along with other characters possessing authority such as Dr. Cuticle, the surgeon of the *Neversink* in *White-Jacket*, are never afforded any insight into their personal lives, leaving the reader with an account of their abuses of authority and little else. This serves as initial evidence that, with Ahab, Melville intends to portray authority in a different way, beginning with a relatable, yet dominant authority who will use those attributes to his personal advantage.

In her article "Following Ahab to Doom or 'Goberning De Shark'," Nancy Hill poses the question of why the crew of the *Pequod* is so easily swayed to follow Ahab on his maniacal endeavor to slay the white whale. This is a question of considerable weight and validity. Not

only does Ahab manage to procure the endearment of his crew, but he is also able to persuade them to abandon their original mission to pursue his own (albeit not perfectly). As Nicholas Cannaday comments:

> So powerful is the sway that Ahab achieves over his men that it enables him even to engender their enthusiasm for the diabolical pursuit of Moby-Dick, which is not only spiritually dangerous, but – what is perhaps more important to these workers in the sperm oil industry – unprofitable as well. (40)

Possessing the leadership abilities necessary to sway his crew to conduct a mutiny of the *Pequod's* mission (to hunt as many whales as possible) in favor of pursuing and killing a single whale, which is also extremely unprofitable for them in their profession, demonstrates the true power and authority which Ahab possesses. Hill concludes in her article that the "masculine community" found aboard the ship provides a sufficient enough explanation for why Ahab is able to sway his crew toward such a goal, but this approach leaves little room for two very important elements in the Ahab equation: the leadership abilities of Ahab himself, those "humanities" which Bildad and Peleg speak so highly of, and the decisions of the crew who choose to serve Ahab, regardless of his influence.

In assessment of Captain Ahab's leadership abilities, there are a number of elements to be taken into consideration. Commanding a ship with such a diverse crew in both racial and cultural respects and uniting that crew under a single goal is not a task easily accomplished. Ahab manages to accomplish this through what can be described as a series of manipulations or illusions which create the impression of the captain as concerned and caring for the well-being of his crew. Canaday comments that "Ahab's dominion begins with his authority as a ship captain, because law and seafaring tradition establish him as the supreme ruler of his ship, but he

successfully extends his sway even beyond that" (41). Ahab does not command his men; he leads his men, a quality which they immediately recognize and respond to favorably. In his book *Pacifism and Rebellion in the Writings of Herman Melville*, John Bernstein notes that "Ahab shows a consideration of others almost unbecoming of a ship's captain" (109). Ishmael records no instances of cruelty or brutality aboard the *Pequod*. Not once is Ahab shown begrudging any of his crew for a lack of formality, and even Starbuck, his primary opponent in his quest for the white whale, ultimately befriends Ahab. Ishmael records no instances of flogging or corporal punishment aboard the ship, demonstrating that Ahab does not abuse his authority in this way and that the men find no reason to commit offenses of any magnitude that might result in such a punishment. There are not even records of discontent with the living conditions of the ship. By excluding these complaints which were so candid and prevalent in Melville's other first-person sea narratives, Melville gives the reader the impression of Ahab as concerned for his crew's comfort and well-being.

In addition to the environment and living conditions which Ahab creates for the *Pequod*, Ahab is also participatory in the operations of the ship. He does not give an order that he wouldn't execute himself. Unlike Captain Vangs and Captain Claret, Ahab shares in the dangers and adversities of the voyage with his men. Bernstein comments on Ahab's frequent presence that he is "everyday visible to the crew" (109). While Ahab has little purpose to be on deck, he makes considerable effort, considering his injuries and deformities, to be among his men. Compared to the efforts of captains in other Melville narratives, Ahab clearly demonstrates abilities as a leader that others do not. His willingness to spend the days and nights alongside his men fosters a certain brotherhood between them. The results of such a brotherhood between captain and men can be seen in the high level of efficiency with which the ship functions.

When a whale is spotted and the masthead watch shouts "there she blows," (207) the ship bursts with activity, and the mates prepare their boats to commence the chase and the killing of a whale. It is during this most dangerous time during the operations of a whaling vessel that Ahab truly shows that he can lead his men. Followed by his five "phantom" boatmen, Ahab orders the whaling boats dropped onto the sea. Ishmael recounts that

> Such was the thunder of his voice that spite of their amazement the men sprang over the rail; the sheaves whirled round in the blocks; with a wallow, the three boats dropped into the sea; while, with a dexterous, off-handed daring, unknown in any other vocation, the sailors, goat-like, leaped down the rolling ship's side into the tossed boats below. (236)

Not only does Ahab display such a charisma in the way which he orders his men to lower the boats and pursue the whale that his men spring to action immediately and enthusiastically, but he also orders his own boat lowered so that he too can pursue the whale *with* his men. By lowering his own boat and giving chase with his men, Ahab demonstrates that he is willing to confront the same perils and dangers that his men face, a very inspirational move on the part of the captain.

While Ahab's lack of abuse aboard the *Pequod* and his display of willingness to suffer the same hardships that his men endure are substantial in his influence over them, it is his persuasive efforts to give the crew a purpose that ultimately persuades them to blindly follow him in his mission to slay Moby-Dick. Jack Chase displays similar qualities in *White-Jacket*, inspiring the men to obediently serve through his humble accounts of battle, his praise of naval ships over whaling vessels, which he deems subpar, and his reverence for military service. Ahab's theatrics on the quarterdeck serve as his inspirational equivalent.

One such example of these theatrics occurs when Ahab reveals his plans to pursue the white whale to the crew. Once the true purpose of the *Pequod's* voyage is revealed, Ahab must then utilize his skills in leadership and manipulation to ensure that the crew not only supports such a detour from their original contract, but also actively participates in Ahab's impractical vendetta. Realizing that financial reward would be the strongest incentive, he gathers the crew near the mast and nails a Spanish gold doubloon to it, offering it to the first man to raise Moby-Dick. This accomplishes two goals. First, by offering financial incentive, Ahab ensures that not only will the men participate in his crusade, but also that they will be enthusiastic in doing so. Additionally, by offering such a reward, Ahab creates a positive impression and rapport with the crew, encouraging further cooperation in the future. Everything that Ahab does is well thought out and designed for the purpose of advancing him toward his goal.

Another example of Ahab's manipulative theatrics occurs immediately after his nailing of the doubloon when he gathers the harpooners, the men who are most responsible for killing the whale, around him. Pouring liquor into their harpoons, he orders them to drink and swear an oath to bring death upon the white whale. Canaday remarks of this incident: "The ceremony is designed to help Ahab control his sailors in the long pursuit that will follow" (42). Much like the doubloon incident directly before, the harpooner "ceremony" is designed by Ahab as a preemptive action to ensure the cooperation of his men, making them feel as though they are part of something larger than themselves, however true or untrue that may turn out to be.

Ahab's theatrics, however successful they are at swaying the crew of the *Pequod*, are not without an opponent. First mate Starbuck presents himself as Ahab's primary obstacle throughout the novel, and Ahab must constantly call upon his leadership to keep Starbuck contained. In chapter 36, after giving another speech, Starbuck is quick to question Ahab's

irrational desire to kill Moby-Dick at all costs. He objects: “Vengeance on a dumb brute! that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous” (178). In response, Ahab demonstrates the extent of his leadership abilities:

> The Crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! he snorts to think of it. Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck!...What is it more? From this one poor hunt, then, the best lance out of all Nantucket, surely he will not hang back, when every foremast-hand has clutched a whetstone. (178)

Ahab accomplishes two objectives with his response to Starbuck. First he compares his crew, specifically his influence over the crew, to the power and destructive force of a hurricane. Now that they are “one and all” with Ahab, nothing, not even Starbuck, can do anything to stop him from pursuing Moby-Dick. In addition to letting Starbuck know that the crew supports his endeavor, Ahab also extends an olive branch to his first mate, trying to persuade him to join the crew. By offering compliments to Starbuck such as calling him “the best lance in Nantucket,” (179) Ahab demonstrates further his truly remarkable leadership abilities to win the hearts and minds of his crew members.

Ahab reveals in chapter 33, during his soliloquy, his intentions with his manipulations of the crew, stating “Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve” (182). Ahab capitalizes on the crew’s loyalty by making them believe that Moby-Dick is the ultimate cause of all problems; Ahab is able to essentially manipulate the image of Moby-Dick into an individualized target, an

icon upon which each of his men can focus their hatred and frustrations. His own purpose is now theirs.

Many are quick to label this highly skillful manipulation as that of a tyrannical dictator. Canaday writes of Ahab that "[Ahab's] authority reflects a strong immoral principle rather than a moral one…Ahab tyrannically coerces not only the bodies but also the souls of his crew" (40). In his article *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, C.L.R. James comments that "[Ahab] is by nature a dictatorial personality…he has learned the usages of command at sea which all tend toward creating a dictatorship" (14). While both Canaday and James make valid points about Ahab's tendencies, they both fail to acknowledge Ahab's leadership as the basis of his power. Rather than utilizing force and fear to enforce his control over his men, Ahab instead manipulates his crew into believing in his cause; they want to follow him on his vendetta. Another consideration in the labeling of Ahab as a dictator are the many other examples of dictators which Melville supplies. *White-Jacket's* Captain Claret, for instance, is much more characteristic of a dictator because he commands exclusively from his given authority and the fear of punishment. Ahab, alternatively, shows no such abuses in his command of the *Pequod*. Ishmael, Melville's representative of the everyman, much like White-Jacket in the previous novel, demonstrates on numerous occasions that it is precisely Ahab's *lack* of dictatorial qualities that makes him such an effective commander of his men:

> I, Ishmael, was one of that crew…my oath had been welded with theirs…Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (194)

There is no doubt in the words of Ishmael as he recounts his emotions and feelings about Ahab. He does not share Starbuck's doubts about his captain's motives, and he gives virtually no indication of even wanting to challenge Ahab's authority. His words reflect only his commitment to the man he has decided to follow. They are not words in description of a dictator, but rather reflect the mindset of a man inspired by a skilled leader.

Not only do we have Melville's previous novels with which to contrast Ahab with leaders easily classified as dictators, Melville also offers examples within the *Moby-Dick* text itself. Melville describes in the text two instances of Mutiny in which the captains of each of the vessels demonstrate a form of incompetence, which, in contrast, Ahab does not exhibit. Both the *Town-Ho* and the *Jeroboam* are subjected to acts of mutiny. The mutiny aboard the *Town-Ho* results from an officer's cruelty. After refusing to obey an order to clean up pig feces from the ship, a task designated to those in a much lower position and thus an order given out of spite, Steelkilt, the leader of the mutiny, breaks the first mate's jaw. Siding with their shipmate, many crewmen refuse to work until the captain pardons Steelkilt for the offense, given its justified nature. Ultimately, perpetrators are subdued and flogged, but the point of the account is not the way in which it ends, but rather the way it begins: with an abuse of authority.

Ahab exhibits none of the injustice or cruelty seen in the mutiny of the Town-Ho. Ahab's leadership much more closely resembles the mutiny of the *Jeroboam*. Resulting from a much more complex list of circumstances, this mutiny involves a fanatical sailor named Gabriel who manipulates the crew to his point of view in much the same way Ahab manipulates the crew of the *Pequod*. Ishmael notes of Gabriel that "so strong did he work upon his disciples among the crew, that at last in a body they went to the captain and told him if Gabriel was sent from the ship, not a man of them would remain" (343). Once a plague breaks out on the ship, Gabriel's

influence over the men becomes all but guaranteed. His claim that he can control the plague is very reminiscent of Ahab's claim that only he can lead the men to kill the legendary whale. The spiritual approach that both men take in manipulating their crews to follow them solidify their positions of power. Of the two mutinies described by Ishmael, it is no coincidence that the mutiny involving force and violence fails while the one utilizing skillful leadership and manipulation succeeds. These are meant to further display the artful nature of Ahab's hold on the *Pequod*.

It must be noted, however, that, while Ahab's authority and leadership demonstrate his effectiveness as a leader, they do not make him the ideal representation of authority which remains ever-elusive in the works of Melville. While Ahab possesses the technical ability to lead, he lacks true concern for the well-being of the men who are ultimately his responsibility. Melville's analysis and demonstration of leadership in *Moby-Dick* shows that while effective leadership is needed to properly administer authority, it can also be used to abuse authority if left unchecked. While Ahab's men willingly follow him, we must not forget that they *do* follow him to their deaths. Ahab's effective leadership establishes a cooperative atmosphere aboard the *Pequod* so powerful that the one man who does object to Ahab's intent, first mate Starbuck, has no substantial way to garner support against his captain. While Starbuck remains persistent in his opposition to Ahab's pursuit of the whale through the majority of the narrative, he never capitalizes on any opportunity to put an end to Ahab's madness.

Melville creates an interesting situation with Starbuck by portraying a first mate who, while both rationally and ideologically opposing the insane and mutinous actions of Ahab, nonetheless abstains from taking action against his clearly compromised captain. In her article *To Obey, Rebelling: The Quaker Dilemma in Moby-Dick*, Wynn Goering attributes Starbuck's

refusal to act to an additional authority to which he subjects himself: his Quaker faith. Introducing the idea of nonresistance from the Quaker text *Testimony of Friends*, Goering notes the obligation of Quakers "believing it to be their religious duty, to demean themselves with proper respect and submission to those are placed above them" (525). Starbuck, then, is subject to a religion which prohibits him from acting against the authority which has been placed over him, a true irony since he is the only member of the *Pequod's* crew to recognize Ahab's true intentions.

Even believing Ahab's leadership to be hazardous to the well-being of both himself and the crew, Starbuck remains limited by his Quaker beliefs which state that no weapon can substitute Christian meekness, kindness, and forbearance. We see this idea demonstrated literally when Starbuck allows himself to premeditate the murder of Captain Ahab, going so far as to point a loaded musket at the deranged captain's head through a wall. He is ultimately unable to carry out this task, however, believing that Divine Providence will instead protect him and the crew from evil as his Quakerism requires. Goering elaborates on this response:

> Starbuck responded the only way a true Quaker could. His job is to hunt whales, and those are the terms he has been offered; thus Starbuck is bound to submit peaceably to the laws of his government (in this case, Ahab), while renouncing the "corrupt bargain" Ahab has made with the rest of the crew. (533)

Starbuck has no choice but to submit himself to Ahab's authority because of his spiritual beliefs, rendering him essentially incapable of taking action against Ahab or saving the *Pequod* and her crew from their tragic end.

In spite of his inability to act against Ahab, Starbuck remains the primary lens through which Ahab's madness becomes apparent and recognizable. It is his contradictory view of

Captain Ahab, as opposed to the immensely positive view of him by the rest of the crew (including Ishmael, the narrator), that contributes the level of ambiguity and ambivalence with which Melville approaches authority in his work. While Ishmael notes the inescapable charisma which inspires the men into following blindly, Starbuck ever increasingly sees Ahab's growing insanity and grows more assertive in his opposition. An excellent example of this is when the oil in the ship's hold begins to leak. Ahab, caring only for searching out and killing Moby-Dick, refuses to waste his efforts to repair the hold, thus saving the profits of the voyage. Starbuck responds harshly, finally realizing the extent of Ahab's obsession with the whale, so powerful that he will completely ignore the original purpose of the voyage:

> "Captain Ahab," said the reddening mate…with a daring so strangely respectful and cautious that it almost seemed not only every way seeking to avoid the slightest outward manifestation of itself; "A better man than I might well pass over in thee what he would quickly enough resent in a younger man; aye! and in a happier, Captain Ahab." (362)

Starbuck's defiant statement to the captain demonstrates both Starbuck's concern for the crew's well-being, in the absence of similar concern from Ahab, and his unwillingness to undermine his captain's authority. While still maintaining "respect and caution" in his address to Ahab, a reinforcement of his Quaker beliefs, Starbuck nonetheless lets Ahab know that he is displeased with the decisions and actions of his captain, asserting that if Ahab were not the captain of the ship, he would more outwardly and openly defy him.

In spite of Starbuck's clear displeasure with Ahab's authority, he finds no viable excuse that would justify a suggestion of mutiny. Despite his knowledge of Ahab's ultimate goal, and knowing how far Ahab is willing to go in order to accomplish that goal (leading his men to their

deaths), Starbuck can find no holes in Ahab's leadership abilities with which to charge him. Starbuck realizes that the mutiny has already been carried out. Ahab has, as Gabriel did aboard the *Jeroboam*, captured the hearts of the crew and turned them away from the mission set by the *Pequod's* owners. This becomes most apparent when Ahab tells Starbuck:

> Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship's keel. (362)

Ahab's words reveal that the ship now belongs to him; he has taken possession of the *Pequod* from its original owners and now has achieved complete autonomy because of the authority granted him by the owners, his keen leadership abilities to make use of that authority, and the crew's willingness to blindly follow him because of those leadership abilities.

While Ahab, with all his skills in manipulation and leadership, certainly contributes to the disaster which the *Pequod* eventually meets, Melville does not attribute the blame for such a disaster solely to the fanatical Ahab. In his article "Something in Emblems: A Reinterpretation of *Moby-Dick*," Charles Foster argues that *Moby-Dick* is characteristically a "social tragedy in which the crew share the guilt and punishment of their captain and in which even the innocent…must go down" (4). Assigning blame and responsibility to both the Captain and the crew, Foster illustrates yet another element of the ambivalent nature of Melville's view on authority. While Ahab's guilt can be somewhat mitigated by his mental instability, the crew's ultimate failure to recognize that instability and put a stop to it is what ultimately leads to their deaths. By *choosing* to follow Ahab unquestioningly, as we see represented by Ishmael's

unquestionable loyalty to him, the crew forgoes its own responsibility to keep abuses of authority in check. Melville asserts here that while abuses of authority are objectionable, it is equally objectionable that those subjected to that abuse do nothing to stop it.

Melville's analysis of authority and leadership in *Moby-Dick* demonstrates the danger of unchecked leadership. Ahab's effectiveness as a leader creates a cooperative atmosphere aboard the *Pequod* in which the crewmembers, having no reason to complain, choose to ignore the signs of Ahab's madness. Starbuck, the only crew member to recognize what has happened, can do nothing to avert the coming disaster due to both his religious beliefs and his inability to find proof of Ahab's intentions, illustrated by Ahab's frequent reminders that he has complete influence and control over the men. The crew meets their end, not because of Ahab's obsession with the whale, but for their willingness to make that obsession their own, failing to recognize the responsibility of recognizing Ahab's insanity and rebelling against it.

Chapter 4: *Billy Budd*: Dilemma of Authority and Circumstance

In regard to authority, whatever the capacity, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924), Melville's final work, presents both the most interesting yet the most controversial source material with which a reader can approach such a subject. This is primarily the result of two essential elements of the work in addition to the complex nature of any Melville text. The first involves the narrative style of *Billy Budd*; rather than the first person narrative so common in his sea-based narratives, Melville instead chooses a third person, omniscient narrator with which to deliver his story. This creates a degree of distance between Melville and his narrative, leading many to view the work as a different type of analysis of abuses of authority and their effect on those subjected to that authority.

The second, and far more influential, factor contributing to the controversial nature of *Billy Budd* is that the novel was posthumously published in 1924, a full three decades after Melville's death. Furthermore, Melville left the novel unfinished in the form of several drafts. This series of revisions, which John Wenke describes in his article *Complicating Vere: Melville's Practice and Revision in Billy Budd*, "not only delineate that Melville himself was a close reader of the character he was creating, but the tenor of his revisions direct the reader to become hermeneutically engaged with a host of connotations and questions" (86). Upon inspection of the drafts, with their many revisions, it becomes quite clear that Melville was somewhat torn about the direction he wished to take in both composition of the narrative as a whole as well as his portrayal of Captain Vere, the primary representative of authority in the novel. While virtually impossible to determine Melville's conclusive intentions with Captain Vere, he nonetheless remains an effective and particularly interesting case study in Melville's approach to the possession and use of authority, whether abused, befitting, or somewhere in between.

Before an analysis of the many circumstances that blur and obscure the approach Melville intended with *Billy Budd*, it is important to look at the finished, published text which we all read and, in spite of the aforementioned circumstances, attribute exclusively to Melville nonetheless. Generally, Melville scholars approaching this work fall into one of two categories. In her book *Shadow Over the Promised Land*, Carolyn Karcher articulates the nature of the debated aspects of the text:

> Critics on one side of the fence have interpreted this short novel as Melville's "testament of acceptance," his final reconciliation with all the tyrannies against which he had chafed since his youth: God, Christ, father, captain, *naval discipline*, and the harsh ways of a flawed world. On the opposite side, critics have cited *Billy Budd* as Melville's "testament of resistance," his deathbed reiteration of…all the works of his young manhood, from *Typee* to the *Confidence Man.* (293)

This passage has particular significance to the way in which Melville criticizes the abuse of authority resulting from both a lack of leadership ability and the moral fortitude with which to appropriately apply it. In *Billy Budd*, the primary character with which to apply this analysis is, without question, Captain Vere. Much like Captain Claret in *White-Jacket* and Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, Vere is in the foremost position of power; it is he who must make decisions which determine the fate of his men.

In analysis of Captain Vere, it is important, first, to note the significant difference in narrative style between *Billy Budd* and its many sea-faring predecessors. With the first person narrators of Melville's previous works, including Tommo, Redburn, White-Jacket, Ishmael, and others, Melville creates a perspective in his narratives which prohibits the reader from viewing

authority figures personally. The point of view in these stories is from that of the common sailor, and, as a result, the reader remains unexposed and unaware of the thought processes and decision-making debates that go on within the mind of the character possessing authority who must decide how to best lead his men. We judge the effectiveness of a captain's leadership largely through the reactions that the narrator, a representative of the common man, has in response to their decisions. Thus, characters such as Captain Vangs, Captain Claret, and, in many instances, Captain Ahab, are judged based on one of an otherwise large spectrum of colors. Ahab becomes the exception to the rule in the latter parts of Moby-Dick, but this is only because Ishmael fades and gradually disappears as the narrator. In *Billy Budd*, however, Melville tells his story using an omniscient, third person narrator from beginning to end, thus providing the reader with a level of understanding, relatability, and sympathy that greatly influences perspective, especially in terms of authority and authority figures.

This shift in narrative style has a significant effect on the reader's perception of Captain Vere who, of the primary characters of the novella (also including Billy Budd and Claggart), appears the most human of the three. While Billy Budd and Claggart are essentially archetypes of good and evil characters, Vere remains a shade of grey in a sea of black and white. As Karcher comments, "In his early works through *Moby-Dick*, as we have seen, Melville sided unequivocally with the victims of injustice" (294). And while these victims are rarely able to surmount the overwhelming force of abusive authority which they are subjected to, these victims are always given Melville's (or his narrator's) sympathy. In the case of *Billy Budd*, the character given the most attention and insight is the polar opposite; rather than the perspective of the common sailor, we are instead given a view of the trials and tribulations of the captain, the authority figure who must choose between two flawed alternatives.

Captain of the HMS *Bellipotent*, Edward Vere represents the pinnacle of the authority debate surrounding *Billy Budd*. Because he is the captain of the vessel, traditionally a focal point of critique for Melville in previous sea-faring narratives like *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*, Melville's portrayal of Vere as an effective or ineffective leader is essential to the interpretation of the entire work as a "testament of acceptance" or "resistance." In analysis of the published text, Melville adorns Vere as an accomplished officer with considerable integrity, especially in comparison to traditional captains of Melville's design:

> a bachelor of forty thereabouts, a sailor of distinction even in a time prolific of renowned seamen. Though allied to the higher nobility, his advancement had not been altogether owing to influences connected with that circumstance. He had seen much service, been in various engagements, always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline; thoroughly versed in the science of his profession, and intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so. (309)

Though matching Ahab in terms of provided background and insight of character, Vere is otherwise portrayed entirely dissimilar to Ahab and the other Melville captains. When Melville scholars such as Byron J. Calhoun describe Vere as a rigid commander "maintaining power through the use of fear" (3), it is difficult not to consider this introductory description of him conveying the exact opposite qualities.

In his argument of the captain as an ineffective leader, Calhoun writes that Vere's rigidity, his refusal to overlook the law, and his obsessiveness with upholding the rules make him a liability who is unable to "look the other way," (2) no matter how slight the offense or how grave the situation demanding it. He goes on to insist that Vere lacks the humanistic qualities of

self-confidence, ease of manner, and sympathy that even his lieutenants possess. The description of the captain from Melville's introduction of him, however, portrays Vere as "always as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men" (309). While it is true that Vere will not tolerate infractions of discipline, a leader mindful of the welfare of his men is not one so reckless that he will execute them just so he can "overstate his authority and play god" (6) as Calhoun suggests. Further, the suggestion that Captain Vere has no sympathy or self-confidence seems to be derived from selecting only the convenient aspects of the text that support it. For example, Calhoun cites the beginning of the narrative when Vere's lieutenant "invites himself into another captain's cabin, helps himself to that captain's liquor, and demonstrates a self-confidence and an ease of manner that Vere sorely lacks" (3). However, to suggest that inconsiderate and inappropriate behavior while boarding a ship, on which you intend to impress civilian sailors into the military, is a desirable character trait from a leader is to invite the very thing which Melville so adamantly warns against in his work. The arrogance and discourteousness of lieutenant Ratcliffe are clearly shown to be so by the reaction of Captain Graveling of the civilian vessel *The Rights of Man*, who, while tolerating the offense, finds it quite distasteful. The "ease of manner" which Calhoun describes of this action, if also embodied by Captain Vere, would essentially make him another Captain Claret, doing as he pleases with little restraint or consideration for those around him.

Calhoun also suggests that the great Horatio Nelson, whom Vere is so often compared to in the novella, is another indication of Vere's failure as an effective leader. Possessing the interpersonal skills that Vere lacks, Nelson possesses "personality and will of strong commanders" (7) that ensures the effectiveness of his troops. According to this measure, Calhoun asserts that Vere fails where Nelson succeeds, and consequently, Vere is an ineffective

commander of his ship and his men. This conclusion is somewhat premature. While Nelson is used to illustrate the ideal commander in *Billy Budd*, to suggest that a captain who lacks even a few of Nelson's qualities is incompetent is to suggest that Nelson is the only effective commander in the entire English Navy. It is clear, then, that such a comparison is only present in the novella to demonstrate that Vere is comparably an excellent commander. While perhaps not quite as heroic as Nelson, the perfect commander, he nonetheless proves to be "a sailor of distinction even in a time prolific of renowned seamen" (309).

By all accounts, Vere has proven himself to have met all of the criteria which all other Melville captains had failed to do before him. Vangs and Claret possess authority given to them by the law and structure of the military, and Ahab possesses both authority and the leadership abilities necessary to utilize it; he does not, however, possess true concern for the well-being of the men that are his responsibility, ultimately leading them to their deaths for his own selfish vendetta against the whale. Vere, "always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men," meets all the criteria which Melville illustrates as needed for an effective leader. In spite of his meeting all these requirements, however, Vere is faced with perhaps a worse dilemma than any of Melville's captains before him: he must sacrifice one good sailor, a victim of poor circumstance, in order to protect all the men aboard the *Bellipotent*.

Calhoun refers, in his portrayal of Vere as a tyrant, to the question that lingers most over the legacy of Vere's character: was his decision to execute Billy the correct one? Further, what was his motivation in making such a decision? Those of the resistance mindset believe that this decision derives from Vere's having pride to the point of corruption. To this end, Calhoun writes that "The irony is that…Vere's pride leads him to overstate his authority and play god…." This is why, according to Calhoun, Vere condemns Billy immediately after the fatal blow has been

dealt to Claggart. Missing from this assertion, however, is that Vere's reaction is hardly immediate, but rather exclaimed after a considerable amount of time has passed, giving Vere more than ample time to consider the difficult situation he is now faced with. Douglas Schaak writes in his article "The Ananias Reference in *Billy Budd*" that "Vere's allusion is, nevertheless, not immediate" (Schaak 87). He is correct; in review of the text, the reader will notice that it is not until after Claggart's body is moved and the surgeon confirms his death that Vere makes the exclamation. It is most likely that during this time, Vere must both consider and decide what course of action he must take to resolve the situation. Taking this into consideration, it seems that rather than "playing god," it is much more likely that Vere is contemplating how to best uphold order aboard his ship in a time of war.

This motivation (upholding order) cannot be understated due to the looming threat of mutiny that appears throughout the narrative. It is in response to an accusation of mutiny, after all, that Billy kills Claggart in the first place. Those who see Captain Vere as an authoritarian claim Vere's decision is unjustified because there is no actual indication of mutiny aboard the *HMS Bellipotent*, and the only possible source of disaffection was Claggart who has just been eliminated (Calhoun 4-5). What they fail to take into account, however, is the effect that uncertainty has on the mindset of a commander in charge of an isolated war vessel. After Vere declares that Billy must be tried immediately, the narrator makes note that both the surgeon and the lieutenants question Vere's decision to hold a trial rather than simply confine Billy, deferring judgment to the admiral of the fleet. It is for this reason that Calhoun asserts that "Vere's lack of trust in his own crew – both officers and enlisted –directly informs his decision to hastily execute Budd" (7). Again, this is an oversimplification of the situation which Vere now faces. The first of these is the location of the *Bellipotent* which the narrator describes:

> In the English squadron…the *Bellipotent* was occasionally employed not only as an available substitute for a scout, but at times on detached service of more important kind. This was not alone because of her sailing qualities, not common in a ship of her rate, but quite as much, probably, that the character of her commander, it was thought, specially adapted him for any duty where under unforeseen difficulties a prompt initiative might have to be taken in some matter demanding knowledge and ability in addition to those qualities implied in good seamanship. (340)

This passage does much to provide context for the situation in which Vere finds himself. His ship has been dispatched on a special operation of particular importance, leaving the *Bellipotent* isolated and far from the rest of the fleet where the admiral is located. This implies that the entire crew of the ship, Vere included, are all under a great deal more stress than normal. Given the distance between the Bellipotent and the fleet, it would likely take days for them to resolve the matter, and, given the nature of the mission that the ship is undertaking at the time of the incident, returning to the fleet is likely not a possibility anyway. Vere is completely aware of this, and, as the passage indicates, the admiral has placed Vere in charge of such a mission specifically *because* of his abilities to handle incidents and "unforeseen difficulties" *without having to consult* with the admiral about what should be done. Vere's "prompt initiative" is why he was chosen for the mission, and it is that very initiative that he must exercise on an unforeseen incident in which an enlisted man murders an officer.

The greatest indication that Vere's actions are motivated by his concern of possible mutiny comes from early in chapter 3 of the novella which discusses two major mutinies which occurred only months before the story of Billy Budd takes place. One of these, The Great Mutiny

at Nore, occurred at the primary site of anchorage for the entire British Fleet, causing great disarray within the entire British Navy. With an event of such magnitude still fresh in mind, Vere must be predisposed to do all he can to avoid the repetition of such an event aboard his own ship. This is an especially valid concern because they are at war, a factor that, while critical in the decision making process, is often overlooked in Vere's case. A mutiny aboard the *Bellipotent* would not only spell disaster for the ship itself, but also compromise the mission for which the ship has been sent, and, in the grander scale of things, cause further disarray in the ranks of the Royal Navy. As a well-regarded and trusted captain, Vere must act to prevent even the possibility of a mutiny aboard his ship. He has no choice but to do what he must to maintain order aboard his ship, even if what he must do is execute a man he holds in high esteem.

Having established that Vere has no choice but to act given the looming threat of mutiny and that his superiors expect him to do so, we may now focus on the decision itself. In his deliberation of the proper action to take in response to Billy's murder of Claggart, there are a number of factors to consider. Vere is a captain not accustomed to spending time around his men; in fact, management of the men is Claggart's job, who has just been killed by one of those under his command. The fact that one of his best men has lost all self-control, killing one of his officers, is more than enough cause for grave concern of potential mutiny on Vere's part. Another argument is that with Claggart's death, the only source of disaffection aboard the ship has been removed, and therefore it is not necessary for Vere to order Billy's execution. A counterargument to this would be that though one source of disaffection has been removed with the murder of Claggart, a new one has been created in Billy Budd, who has essentially fallen from grace by murdering his commanding officer. Whether intentional or not, it *is* Billy who throws the blow which ends Claggart's life, and it would be irresponsible of Vere, as the captain

of the ship, to let such an infraction go unpunished. Doing so could give the men an impression of weakness in the captain, opening the door for a possible mutiny. In this sense, Calhoun is correct in suggesting that Vere's lack of trust in his men leads him to decide Billy's fate. Considering the circumstances – the recent mutinies, the clandestine nature of the ship, and Vere's relative unfamiliarity with the men – it seems perfectly sensible that not only can Vere not afford to trust his men, but he *shouldn't* trust them. The man aboard his ship for whom he held respect has just murdered Vere's master-at-arms right in front of him.

It must be noted, in spite of all the circumstances which lead Vere to finally condemn Billy to death that Vere is not unaware of the unfortunate circumstances which ultimately resulted in the sentence. Even before Claggart's death, when both he and Vere are together in the cabin with Billy, Vere remains very skeptical of Claggart's accusations that Billy Budd seeks to instigate a mutiny. He asserts to Claggart:

> "Do you come to me, Master-at-arms, with so foggy a tale? As to Budd, cite me an act or spoken word of his confirmatory of what you in general charge against him. Stay," drawing nearer to him; "heed what you speak. Just now, and in a case like this, there is a yardarm-end for the false witness (346)."

Not only does Vere demonstrate suspicion of Claggart's accusations, but he also ensures him that if he's found to be falsely accusing Billy Budd, which he clearly suspects, then Claggart will be the one to hang. Unfortunately, Billy is unable to defend himself verbally, ultimately throwing the blow that kills Claggart and results in his hanging.

In addition to an awareness of the situation, Vere also demonstrates a degree of consideration and reflection on the decision he is forced to make. The narrator notes that Vere spends some time alone with Billy in the holding cell, noting that "beyond the communication of

the sentence, what took place at this interview was never known" (366). While not revealing the content of the conversation between Billy and Vere, the narrator goes on to imply that Vere likely explains to Billy the reasons for the decision he has made, and that Billy would have accepted it "not without a sort of joy, indeed, he might have appreciated the brave opinion of him implied in his captain's making such a confidant of him" (366). While Melville leaves the conversation between Vere and Billy very clouded and ambiguous, the narrator's implications do much to show that Vere is indeed aware of the unfortunate circumstances which have resulted in the incident, and that he has made the best decision he can based on those circumstances.

This is not to assert however, that Vere has no remorse for what he has ordered. The narrator comments that a lieutenant who observes Vere leaving the holding cell, after his handing down of the sentence, notes of Vere:

> The face he beheld, for the moment one expressive of the agony of the strong, was to that officer…a startling revelation. That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated by the former's exclamation in the scene to be touched upon. (367)

The incident to be touched upon, Billy's hanging, in which he shouts inexplicably "God bless Captain Vere!" as if to accept his death readily, stands in stark contrast to Vere's torment at having to condemn him, shown visually in the impressionable look of agony which the lieutenant notes upon Vere's exiting of the holding cell. Vere's clear regret, not for the decision he has made, but for the unfortunate circumstances that lead to it, clearly demonstrates his quality as a leader, a man who must make hard decisions for the greater good.

Sometime after the sentencing and execution of Billy, the Bellipotent enters a battle during which Captain Vere is mortally wounded. Upon his deathbed, notes the narrator, Vere

was heard by his attendant murmuring "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" (382). The attendant is very clear to indicate to the senior marine officer that these are not the "accents of remorse," leading many to attribute this as Vere's final demonstration of arrogance. However, as the narrator notes, the officer whose opinion this assessment is based upon is the officer most reluctant to condemn Billy. Taking this into consideration, it is most likely that, rather than assessing any actual tone with which Vere speaks his last words, the officer is merely projecting his own disagreement with Vere's decision upon the dying captain who, as the other accounts in the story suggests, demonstrates great remorse for what becomes of Billy Budd.

Another aspect of the Vere debate that must also be taken into consideration is Melville's own difficulty in deciding what type of character Vere would become. John Wenke comments in his article "Complicating Vere: Melville's Practice of Revision in *Billy Budd*" that "The proliferation of such resolutely fixed, though polarized, accounts seems an ironic counterpoint to Melville's own inability to let the story go" (Wenke 83). The fact that Melville was so indecisive in producing a final draft of his final work is, in part, responsible for fueling the debate between pro-Vere and anti-Vere critics.

Wenke goes on to comment, "Specifically, in revising, Melville complicated Vere in such a way that a sane, judicious and well-meaning person can reasonably take the same character, the same acts, the same words and draw radically antagonistic conclusions" (Wenke 85). The revisions to Vere's character were so numerous that they are indicative of a "calculated movement" by Melville to move away from specific determinations to more open ended suggestions. In other words, Melville intentionally wrote and re-wrote Vere's character into deeper and deeper ambiguity, ultimately not being able to finish the process before his death. It is

these various ambiguities, left by him, which ultimately allow the debate between pro and anti-Vere critics to continue.

Conclusion

In looking at several of Melville's works in which the abuse of authority remains, if not the primary theme, then a theme at the forefront nonetheless, it becomes quite clear that the abuse of authority was an issue residing very close with Melville, and a quick glance at any aspect of the writer's life will reflect as much. His youth, spent aboard various ships and naval vessels saw him subjected to the 'harsh discipline of the sea." In his adult years, Melville found himself highly dissatisfied with the leadership in American politics which, he believed, ultimately caused many of the political problems the country experienced, including slavery and, of course, the Civil War. Even in his later life, notes Karcher:

> Thus by the time Melville again undertook to formulate in prose the conflict between rebellious youthful idealism and repressive worldly authority that had dominated his literary career, he was writing out of the experience not just of a son thwarted in his efforts to fulfill his ideas, but of a father whose harshness and insensitivity to his children's needs may have driven one son to suicide and the other to a series of flights from home…that culminated in a lonely death. (296)

Every aspect of Melville's life was affected by the misuse of authority in one way or another, and, naturally, that theme appears more than any other across his writing from beginning to end. Melville's ultimate goal for writing about such a topic at such length is, for the most part, a matter of speculation. He certainly wished to influence the awareness and opinions of others, especially in the case of works such as *White-Jacket*, which ultimately played a major role in policy changes within the Navy regarding corporal punishment.

When I began this study of authority in the works of Melville, I was convinced that his works presented a clear progression that began with a young, anti-authority Melville, frustrated

and rebellious toward authority figures in his life and ended with an older, wiser Melville, realizing the importance which authority plays in maintaining balance and harmony in society. What I ultimately discovered in these works was something quite different. Beginning with *Typee,* it became clear that Melville was not opposed to the presence of authority at all, but rather to those who possess authority and abuse it, harming those subjected to that authority. In that text, Melville demonstrates two hierarchies of leadership. The first, the naval, military hierarchy, features an abusive captain who creates living conditions aboard his ship so intolerable that Tommo, the protagonist, ultimately chooses to live among cannibals as a better alternative. While Tommo is ultimately unable to live amongst the Marquesans, he notes on numerous occasions the superiority of their leadership structure in which no one abuses their authority in order to take advantage of or harm others below them.

In *White-Jacket*, Melville engages further with the idea of leadership, molding it into a personal quality which some possess and others do not. The two exemplary characters of this approach are Captain Claret and Jack Chase, the former of which possesses the authority granted him by his rank and position within the navy and the latter of which lacks the authority established by naval law, but possesses a remarkable ability to lead and inspire men. This results in a contrast piece in which the men despise Captain Claret, a man who disregards their well-being in favor of achieving results, while simultaneously adoring Chase, a man who always looks out for the men above all else.

Melville further complicates this idea in *Moby-Dick*, by combining the forces of legal authority with charismatic leadership into the notorious Captain Ahab. While initially appearing to be the perfect hybrid of leadership qualities which White-Jacket so fervently desires in the previous novel, Ahab proves to be quite the opposite. He instead demonstrates the dangers of a

leader who possesses those qualities needed to be an effective leader, but lacking the moral compass with which to utilize those qualities. Ultimately, rather than providing the solution to the leadership problems presented in his previous novels, he presents another potential danger of authority being left unchecked.

In *Billy* Budd, we are finally shown the leader Melville seems to so avidly want to create as he experiments with the different qualities necessary to create an effective authority figure. Captain Vere not only possesses the legal authority and leadership ability to effectively command men, he also demonstrates, primarily in his treatment and reactions to Billy, that he truly cares for the well-being of his men. In spite of his finally creating this character at the end of his life, the terrible circumstances which Vere must act on ultimately lead many to view him as just another tyrant captain.

The most important thing to note in a discussion of authority and leadership in the works of Melville is his concern for the common people. With each of these texts, Melville looked to convey to his readers a sense of responsibility to take control of their own fates. In a time when Melville recognized a need for strong leaders, his works attempt to guide people to a discussion of the same social issues. This means of expression resulted in some of the most influential works in American literature.

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