

BILLY BUDD, FORETOPMAN: RE-READING DESIRE

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Abstract

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* is hostile to interpretation (Kelley 2008): ambiguous, posthumous and possibly incomplete, it has left criticism at odds – its symbolisms and allegories sending out messages at times coherent, at times deeply contradictory. Since its publication in 1924 at least two main strands have dominated the critical panorama on the novella, one focused on the legalistic aspects raised by the text and one centered on the homoerotic substratum of the characters' relations instead. Maintaining that, though not erroneous, such schemes tend to leave out portions of meaning in order to comply with an idea of interpretation, this paper aims at offering a third view towards the understanding of a conflictual text in light of desire theories: the role of envy as a leading passion will be analyzed, together with that of identification in the process of identity-making. The concepts of “flexible” and “rigid” identity (Bottiroli 2002; 2006) will be relied on in order to account for the behavior of the three main characters (Billy, Vere, Claggart), including their apparent contradictions and aporias.

Key words

Billy Budd; *Theories of Desire*; *Melville Studies*; *American Literature*

Introduction

In the chapter devoted to *Billy Budd* in *Herman Melville. An Introduction*, author Wyn Kelley underlines several times the difficulties of interpretation arising from the text: the story, Kelley claims, requires the reader's active participation to understand its complexities (2008: 177). Despite the rather linear plot, the novella leaves a series of open questions: the aim of this paper is to try and give an answer to these questions, adopting an interpretative perspective derived from the framework of desire theories.

The action takes place in 1797 in Europe and follows the events which lead to the protagonist's death by hanging. Billy Budd is a 21-year-old sailor employed on the ship *Rights of Man*; during a recruiting session, he is selected by a lieutenant to join the crew of the *Indomitable*, a ship of the Royal Navy, aboard which he obtains the role of foretopman. Billy is a rather flat, un-complex character: he is a beautiful man – his good looks and lovable disposition make him a favorite on every ship or boat, and the *Indomitable* is no exception. On the ship, however, he also realizes (naively) that the admiration and good feelings he excites in people

can cause some other fellow sailors to dislike, envy and even hate him: this is the case of Claggart, master-at-arms, hardly tolerated in his role of “chief of police” by the rest of the crew and extremely jealous of Billy’s seemingly unconscious ability to be loved by everybody. A false charge of mutiny is moved against the foretopman, who, completely outraged and unable to put his feelings into words, strikes the accuser – Claggart himself – and kills him. Despite everyone being sure the accident can be dismissed as such, with no charge of intentionality, Billy is sentenced to hang from the mast, an ‘exemplary execution’ which should prove the Captain’s loyalty to the King and his laws.¹ Billy seems to accept the Captain’s solution and dies just the same way he lived, loved by everybody and bestowing his blessing upon his own hangman: simple as it can be. Yet, one cannot help but wonder: why does Captain Vere choose to execute Billy, when he could just as easily decide to drop the charges? Why does Billy accept his destiny so passively? Why does Claggart decide to challenge Billy in such a clumsy way, and why does he decide to put so much on the line? To have *what* in return?

In his *Introduction*, Kelley summarizes a few interpretative frameworks (2008: 181) applied to the analysis of *Billy Budd*: all of them imply the necessary conclusion that “no reading can prevail over the others” (185). In order to make a move away from the aporia of relativism, I will try to approach the text through the ‘toolkit’ provided by theories of desire, which tend to dismiss context-based interpretations in favor of an unveiling of the story’s mechanisms as embodied by the making of characters’ identity.

Interpreting Billy Budd: previous voices

Billy Budd as allegory: Innocence, Justice and the Law as Father

From the very first pages, Billy is described in prelapsarian terms: he has almost no flaws, being as beautiful and good-natured as he is; his intellect is surely not sharp, yet he does possess some (“a certain degree of intelligence” [237]) and his “rectitude” is “unconventional” (237). Melville does not refrain from making Billy’s Edenic nature more than clear:

- (1) He possessed a certain degree of intelligence, along with the unconventional rectitude of the sound human **creature** – one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable **apple of knowledge**. He was **illiterate**; he could not read, but he could sing, and like the illiterate nightingale was sometimes the composer of his own song (237; my emphasis)

Billy is an “upright barbarian” (234) whose lack of awareness of the complexities of human nature places him in a very favorable spot to be the object of the ill purposes of someone like Claggart.

The master-at-arms is almost the exact opposite of Billy: he is endowed with “more than average intellect” (245) and, with his pale complexion, seems out of

place among the sailors.² He has not always been a seaman, and little is known about his previous life and his origins – a feature which he shares with Billy. Yet, even in their similarity the two are specular and opposite: Billy is a foundling whose “Noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse” (233); his has been a simple life of honest work and no secrets. Claggart, instead, is mysterious in a more ambiguous way, he is both an Englishman and a foreigner (“It might be that he was an Englishman; and yet there lurked a bit of accent in his speech suggesting that he was not such by birth,” [245]), both a novice to the sailing business and capable enough to have reached the rank of master-at-arms in a fairly short time. Billy proceeds unknowingly towards his fate, ignoring people’s warnings (the Dansker, an elderly sailor on board the *Indomitable*, tells Billy that “*Jemmy Legs [...] is down on you*” [250], italics in the text) until it is too late. The foretopman’s only defect, stuttering in the presence of great emotion, causes him to react violently instead of talking his way through a defense: knowledge, after all, could have saved Billy Budd.

Still, Captain Vere could also have saved Billy. Vere has a very favorable opinion of the young foretopman – whom he thinks “a ‘*King’s bargain*’” ([272], italics in the text) – and his attitude in front of Claggart’s insinuations is one of utter disbelief. He has to ask more than once if the person the master-at-arms is talking about is *precisely that Billy*:

- (2) “You say that there is at least one dangerous man aboard. Name him”
 “William Budd, a foretopman, your honour.”
 “William Budd!” Repeated Captain Vere with unfeigned astonishment;
 “and mean you the man that Lieutenant Ratcliffe took from the merchant-
 man not very long ago – the young fellow who seems to be so popular with
 the men – Billy, the Handsome Sailor, as they call him?” (272)

Vere is described as an exceptional man, one whose expertise in matters of sailing life would perhaps not be fathomable when seeing him on land (241), but extremely capable and brave. He is intellectually active and never sails at sea without a “newly replenished library” (246) in which he mostly likes to keep books about “realities” (246): he is not a creative spirit, but apparently a man only led by rationality and reasonableness. His perfect sanity is never doubted, at least until he decides to support the decision to execute Billy: Vere’s arguments in favor of this unpopular choice are all about loyalty and duty. “Budd’s intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose” (286), he says when the members of the drumhead court make a point about Billy’s ultimate innocence. Vere does seem to acknowledge the final un-naturalness of this choice, but that is not enough for him to refrain from executing the foretopman:

- (3) “[...] Now can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow-creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so? – Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King.” (286)

The Captain creates a full system of reference according to which there is no other way than proceeding with the hanging, which takes place in the very early morning following the night of the killing. Again, Billy's prelapsarian innocence is continuously underlined in the text: when alone in the corner where he has to await execution, Billy is represented as musing but unafraid.

As briefly shown, Melville employs a good deal of symbolic references, ultimately converging in a few allegoric schemata, readily picked up by critics when reading the novella. In a sense, Billy's is the story of a Fall which gains universality: in her 2017 *The Fall from Literary Theory*, Vrajitoru Andreassen analyzes a number of works adopting the perspective of *fallenness* as a situation of change from an original status to another one, implying *lacking* – and chooses *Billy Budd* in particular to exemplify “fall from innocence” (89).

Billy's, however, is not the only ‘fall’ which permeates interpretative approaches to the novella: references to the French Revolution and the Nore and Spithead mutinies as background to the text are not casual. At the beginning of chapter XVIII, Melville states that “the unhappy event which has been narrated could not have happened at a worse juncture” (278). The story of Billy Budd – which, the author tells us, spreads among people through popular fiction and bad press, distorted and changed – thus becomes a parable in the fashion of post-revolutionary works such as *Caleb Williams, or Things as They Are* by the political philosopher and writer William Godwin. In his 1966 article, Roland A. Duerksen maintains that the novel and the novella “both imply a look beneath the shell or crust of human society” (373). Indeed, they are both concerned with unjust power relations, which cause a weak subject to be abused by a strong one in the name of an entirely man-made law. Instead of believing in the fixed value of right and wrong according to social standards, it is one's conscience's standards that should always be interrogated and acted accordingly: Caleb should not be deemed responsible, just like Billy. In this scenario, Vere's decision to execute Billy can also be read as part of the inheritance of the Enlightenment notion of punishment in *utilitarian* terms: its function will be both the actual “suppression” of the criminal act and the prevention of other, similar acts (Curi 2019: 339). When the foretopman kills Claggart, he causes a damage in the symbolic tissue of the society in which he lives: Vere's duty, independently of what he believes ‘fair’ and beyond human compassion, is to put some stitches on that damage and show everybody what will happen in case of mutinous behavior.

That of Law is a paradigm that has been developed also in interpretations based on different backgrounds: it is indeed difficult to ignore possible stratifications of meaning emerging from the equivalence Law = Father in a novella so deeply rooted in the description of a hierarchical structure and male micro-society. The relationship between Vere and his crew – including Billy – is one which can be related to an archetypal father-son bond, in which the Father figure is a voice for both authority and approval. However, Vere has too strong a fantasy of what law enforcement *should be* to fully play the father role and fails to renegotiate his vision of things: for as much as he may love Billy, he loves being the authoritative figure more and wants to remain such. He is afraid that the crew will see him as weak if he does not support the decision to execute Billy, and yet cannot escape

the inevitable erotic bond he feels for the unfortunate foretopman: the “economy of erections” (Sedgwick 1990: 125) in the hanging scene stands as a witness to the Captain’s state of mind (Umphrey 2007: 427). The crew relies on Billy as a mediator in their relationship of identification and idealization with the Law and, indirectly, with Vere himself (Umphrey 2007: 427). This reinforces the idea that it is through love, and not through violence alone, that authority is legitimized aboard the *Indomitable*. Claggart’s role is thus that of the lover-hater, the person whose desire has to be suppressed and is thus “converted into enmity” (Umphrey 2007: 418). With his mixed feelings, Claggart anticipates the problem of love and violence; symbolically, his authoritative role subsumes the triad Law-love-enforcement which is then better exemplified by Vere. For the sake of the plot, his presence is essential, since without his accusation nothing would have happened.

This reading of the story thus sees *Billy Budd* as a means to express a critique towards a certain vision of the law, and as a narrative about the psychological mechanisms which bind people to authority. Moreover, it connects criticism on the novella to further studies on Melville and homosexuality: an exhaustive account of Melville’s configurations of homosexual ties is presented in a 1994 article by Caleb Crain, who points out how the existence of such ties is recurrent throughout the writer’s *oeuvre*, including his personal letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and frequently accompanied by metaphors of cannibalism and violence. A similar account can also be found in the *Companion to Herman Melville* (2015): chapter 15, by Leland S. Person, is entirely devoted to a re-reading of Melville’s works in the light of “Gender and Sexuality,” since criticism in the 1970s and 80s mostly neglected such aspects (231).

Among the merits of such interpretative frameworks, the acknowledgment of the centrality of desire within the novella is surely paramount: on such premises, further analyses can be carried out in order to account for how desire and its companion notions, identity and identification, can be used to reconstruct the engines of the story.

Re-reading desire

Theoretical background

Is it possible to look at *Billy Budd* in a way which ignores the implications of desire? From the very beginning, Billy appears to readers not only in his prelapsarian qualities, but also in his desirability. He is endowed with feminine qualities which aboard a ship exclusively inhabited by men do not pass unnoticed, and his nickname, “Baby,” surely adds to the picture. This goes to endorse and justify how in previous accounts which used the desire paradigm to explain the ‘blind spots’ of the story one main point was made about the characters’ hidden homosexual impulses towards each other and, in particular, towards Billy.

My proposal espouses the concern with desire as a main component of *Billy Budd*, but it sees the story as the enactment of a different kind of mechanism, one which involves the making of two flexible identities (Claggart’s and Vere’s)

‘stumbling upon’ the rigidity of a third, unmoving one (Billy’s) – *Billy Budd* is the story of three men and their identities in front of “unforeseen circumstances and critical situations” (Stolarek 2018: 147). My reading will thus proceed in light of the close relationship between desire and identity, developed through identification.

The idea of dividing the three characters according to the principle of flexibility *vs* rigidity is based on Giovanni Bottirolì’s theories of identity, which he builds on a review of desire mechanisms from Freud to René Girard. Some subjects, Bottirolì writes, “do not move, they are bound to one gaze only, one type of intelligence, one way of being” whereas others are “flexible, complex” (Bottirolì 2006: 183).³ In this vision, the role of Billy – a *rigid* identity – is that of an obstacle, something which, by not participating flexibly in the mechanism, causes the scenario to turn completely tragic.

One’s identity is the result of a series of processes of *identification*: in this concern, Bottirolì’s stance moves from the analysis of the phenomenon offered by Sigmund Freud in his 1921 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. The preeminence given to the desire to be (as opposed to the desire to *have*, the objectual investment in another being) offers, in Bottirolì’s view, the best grounds to argue for an individual’s quest for identity. The processes of identification undergone by characters (as people) are not to be meant mimetically, but as an attempt to go beyond the limits of one’s self; among the examples quoted by the scholars are Hamlet, unwillingly forced to exist in a ‘revenge plot’ with which he does not wish to comply (Bottirolì 2020: 96), and Raskol’nikov, Dostoevskij’s protagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, who is involved in a type of “distinctive” identification⁴ directed both at his Ego and at his Ego ideal (2002).

Identification and identity in *Billy Budd*

Melville’s master-at-arms finds himself caught up in a situation which resembles Raskol’nikov’s: he simultaneously wants to be something and is haunted by the awareness that he is not and could never be that something. Much like Rodion Romanovič, Claggart has always been aware of such a desire. This perspective does not exclude the erotic drive which attracts Claggart to Billy, but makes it dialogue with issues concerning his identity: whereas previous readings tended to see envy as a ‘minor’ passion, secondary and derivative if compared to erotic attraction (read in terms of objectual investment), my analysis relies on the idea that the two are not posited on a hierarchic scale but, if anything, coexist.

Claggart wants to be liked by people. At the same time, he is painfully aware of the reality of facts – that he is a master-at-arms, generally disliked and scorned by his fellows. His abilities have simply brought him to occupy a position which causes him to remain an ambiguous and untrustworthy outsider: someone who is lied to, someone, even, whose superiority of intellect and capability are not acknowledged if not career-wise. The master-at-arms does not share the full lack of empathy and the utterly solipsistic moral standards of the famous Russian *лишний человек*, *superfluous man*, but his inner torture surely makes him participate in a similar identity dilemma.

The development of Claggart's antipathy and of his plans to act against Billy are presented in chapter XI of the novella: at the beginning, the master-at-arms does not express any wish to *destroy* Billy, as he just wants to engage in conflict. He hopes that the Handsome Sailor will respond, that this apparently inexplicable hostility will be reciprocal: the same way we wish for mutual attraction,⁵ we wish for our bitterness to be received with bitterness, we want to build ourselves up against the other. Indifference or unawareness would bring us to fight only with ourselves, or to look for distorted ways to excite a reaction in our counterpart:

- (4) Probably, the master-at-arms' clandestine persecution of Billy was started to try the temper of the man; but it had not developed any quality in him that enmity could make official use of, or ever pervert into even plausible self-justification; so that the occurrence at the mess, petty if it were, was a welcome one to that peculiar conscience assigned to be the private mentor of Claggart; and for the rest, not improbably, it put him upon new experiments (259)

The foretopman is totally blind to this state of affairs: he refuses to listen to the only person who sees it for what it is (the Dansker) and at the moment of revelation acts violently. He does not adjust to his surroundings. Billy is the only character who does not move an inch from his initial premises: this rigidity clashes with Claggart's mutability first and Vere's after.

The Captain is also undergoing a process of identification directed to his Ego ideal. He wants to be a good, a *great* Captain of the Royal Navy: his figure is indirectly paralleled to the one of Horatio Nelson, to whom Melville devotes a chapter of digression (IV), in which he also adds a few remarks about the admiral's supposed excess of vanity. Vere is introduced to the reader in chapter V, after a few observations which, in retrospect, make his actions appear even more unjustified: after the digression on Nelson, the author clarifies further the historical context in which the story is taking place and underlines how

- (5) [...] on board the seventy-four on which Billy now swung his hammock very little in the manner of the man and nothing obvious in the demeanour of the officers would have suggested to the ordinary observer that the Great Mutiny was a recent event" (241).

Not only thus is Vere ignoring the accidental nature of Claggart's killing, but also that there is no reason to believe any mutinous action is taking place aboard the *Indomitable*.

The Captain's wish to be considered a great figure, however, cannot simply be fulfilled by the execution; Vere also has to deal with Billy directly, face to face and alone. But why? And to do *what*? These are the questions which have surrounded one most mysterious episode in the novella, the final encounter between the foretopman and the man who put him to death. The narrator leaves us out of the scene, a fact which has prompted interpretations suggesting the two have a sexual encounter (Rubin 1980: 67). In this scenario, the encounter would be some sort

of a 'last-night-on-Earth' thing, if not even, as it would seem by the words used by Rubin,⁶ an attempt on the part of the Captain to 'make it up' to Billy for having decided to have him hanged. In this reading, Billy responds to people's attraction towards him with equal attraction – yet, there is no proof of such feelings. The foretopman has surely developed an attachment towards the Dansker, but he does not show any passion, either violent or sensual, towards anybody else.

Whatever the nature of the encounter, I maintain Vere is actually trying to add Billy to the group of those who think of him as of a great captain and a loyal subject of the King. He cannot just go on with the execution unless he is sure the foretopman understands and forgives him – and although he has doubts, he also knows that Billy's system of values allows for some kind of acceptance. Even more so, if Vere can just *share his responsibility* with someone else, by tricking Billy into believing that his death has been decided by his other superiors. The Captain is not the only one involved in the sentence: he has summoned a drumhead court, which is described as composed of individuals totally inadequate to the handling of such matters (279-280). By choosing such people and being the only witness, the Captain is *de facto* the only person having a say in the issue, but formally he can just dismiss the whole share of his involvement and put the blame on "the first lieutenant, the captain of marines and the sailing-master" (279). During Billy's interrogation, Vere makes him believe that he has control over the situation – the Captain cannot be unaware of the fact that Billy deems him his "best helper and friend" (282). He relies on the fact that Billy, much like the members of the drumhead court, will not grasp the full moral dilemma posited by the situation: after Vere's first exhortation to take into account only the *consequences* (Claggart's death) and not the *motives* of the facts under investigation, Billy is in fact confused and turns

- (6) a wistful, interrogative look towards the speaker, a look in its dumb expressiveness not unlike that which a dog of generous breed might turn upon its master, seeking on his face some elucidation of a previous gesture ambiguous to the canine intelligence (*BB*, 282)

Here comes the necessity for a private meeting after the hearing: Vere understands that he cannot let Billy die thinking that he is a 'bad' Captain or that he is to *blame* for what is going on. His need for acknowledgment is necessary to the building of his identity as much as his actions. In the off-chance possibility that the foretopman has understood his scheme, the Captain thus goes to meet him. The narrator writes:

- (7) It would have been in consonance with the spirit of Captain Vere should he on this occasion have concealed nothing from the condemned one; should he indeed have frankly disclosed to him the part he himself had played in bringing about the decision, at the same time revealing his actuated motives (288)

But readers know this is highly unlikely. If it were so, why not showing the reader? Why should Vere be spared this moment of glory, when he has already been praised multiple times? Did Vere lie, in that hidden encounter?

Answering questions

With respect to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, as well as to the place this analysis can have in the more general panorama of studies on the novella, a few preliminary answers can be given, and considerations made.

Let us quickly recall the core questions concerning *Billy Budd*:

Why does Claggart act so clumsily, despite his proclaimed intelligence?

Why does Vere decide to execute Billy when he could just have dropped the charges?

Why does Billy accept the execution so passively?

Claggart's actions are led by a desire which cannot be satisfied, and which probably does not even know its way to fulfilment. Thus, the clumsy plan, the nonsensical accusations and the tragic outcome. At the same time, Vere's decision relies on a desire which he sees as attainable: he wants to be respected in his role of Captain, and who would take him seriously if he were to grace Billy? Umphrey was right in seeing Vere's actions as a form of enforcement which has to overcome contrasting feelings – but her explanation gave a role to Vere's attachment to Billy which my analysis does not fully endorse.

Last but not least, come Billy and his acceptance: the foretopman is a rigid character. He maintains his prelapsarian qualities throughout the novella – so much so that, after having killed Claggart, he refuses self-defense, and puts his fate in the hands of Vere. In the last scene, his figure overlaps with that of Christ himself and his last words, “God Bless Captain Vere,” confirm it by echoing the “Forgive them, father” of Luke's Gospel. But Billy is not Jesus, he is not a prophet with proselytes and does not preach any doctrine: he is just a simple young man, a rigid identity suffering from the development of two more flexible ones.

In this scenario, Billy's death fulfils the role of defining further the extent to which the other characters' desires have failed to get anywhere close to their realization. Claggart's wish has been partially and perversely satisfied, since Billy has been executed, but at the cost of the master-at-arms' own life; Captain Vere does not really succeed in proving his full loyalty to the navy, since eventually his image is completely ruined in the eyes of his own crew. In the end, only Billy forgives him: the crew repeats the blessing, but “at that instant Billy alone must have been in their hearts, even as he was in their eyes” (296). Vere knows that: at his dying moment, he reciprocates Billy's last words and murmurs his name, though famously without “accents of remorse” (301). His death shows the ultimate uselessness of Billy's sacrifice.

Billy Budd may very well be hostile to interpretation and require an effort on the part of the reader to be understood in its totality; the interpretation offered here is neither final nor unmodifiable, but it surely tried to force that hostility.

Conclusion

Giovanni Bottirolì borrows Lev Tolstoj's expression, лабиринт сцеплений (*labyrinth of linkages*), as a successful way to define what a work of literature is (2018: 4). In his 2018 "manifesto," he has promoted a view of literary criticism which would go back to analyzing texts 'in their own right' against flattening and simplifying 'contextualist' solutions, and his proposal in the field of desire theories is an attempt in this direction.

What this reading of Melville's *Billy Budd* has tried to do is precisely to analyze a text and to answer the questions it posits without turning to outer factors as explanations, without necessarily looking at the text as 'standing for' something. This interpretation is not final: future readers with a different set of theoretical tools will probably be able to overturn it, build on it or access it with a different mindset and answering different questions. However, the mechanism enacted by Billy, Vere and Claggart has been displayed; the protagonists have had their say through the novella and through paper continue having it, without playing a pre-existent role which context-based interpretations tended to force upon them.

Notes

- ¹ The episode was apparently inspired by a similarly unjustified execution which took place in 1842 (Kelley 2008: 176).
- ² Much like Billy, in a way; here is a consideration by the Dansker: "Was it that his eccentric unsentimental old sapience, primitive in its kind, saw or thought it saw something which, in contrast with the war-ship's environment, looked oddly incongruous in the Handsome Sailor?" (249).
- ³ Another instance in which Bottirolì exemplified a conflict between rigidity and flexibility is in his analysis of Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar* ("Shakespeare e il teatro dell'intelligenza").
- ⁴ Bottirolì presents three *stili di pensiero* (ways of thought) which are used to discern among as many modes or styles of identification (the Italian word "regime," *regime*, of Lacanian source [1977], is used by the author). These three ways of thought are the "separative," the "confusive," and the "distinctive."
We will define as distinctive identification a situation of partial assimilation, which augments the powers and complexities of a psychic instance; confusive identification consists instead of a partial overlapping, from which unforeseeable advantages or disadvantages (enrichments or losses) can derive. (my translation)
Later on, Bottirolì points out how the styles of thought can be further distinguished depending on their involvement with different parts of the subject - Ego, Ego Ideal and so on.
- ⁵ Or at least *respond* to us: "the amorous subject suffers anxiety because the loved object replies scantily or not at all to his language (discourse or letters)" (Barthes 1978: 167).

- ⁶ “Vere knows that Billy is morally innocent of the crime for which he must hang, and he knows that he alone is responsible for Billy’s impending death. How can he possibly make it up to the boy—even in the slightest degree—in the precious few moments given to them alone together? Vere, with his rigidly repressed passions now surging upward in this moment of emotional crisis and trauma, may he not have committed the act which, to Melville, is at once unspeakable and holy?” (Rubin 1980: 67).

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