Sighting the Whale and ‘The Rights of Man’:
Teaching with Film Adaptations of the Novels of Herman Melville

The lights are out. It is dark in the classroom. Perhaps it is a bit like Plato’s cave. Or one might imagine that we are in the hold of a great ship. After all, there’s no frigate like a book to take us away, as Emily Dickinson once wrote. That is, unless we have a movie. We hit the remote, see a flicker, and hope for epistemic light. The image on the screen before us opens out on a vast sea.¹

Our class is a place where we look at human character, values, and choices. There my students encounter film adaptations from literature. Recalling those classes, in this essay I focus on the film adaptations that we share from the works of Herman Melville, whose stories probed human nature within the wide margins of the sea. Film versions of his work bring to the classroom complex novels like Moby Dick and shorter, equally poignant works, like Billy Budd.² These films point beyond our classrooms to a world in which the forces of nature meet the choices and actions of men. Melville’s universe is an often ambiguous one. Yet, I have found film adaptations of these stories vital in their own right and valuable in conveying themes, ideas, and issues to my classes. The shorter novels, or sections of the longer novels, can be read in connection with the respective films. These films effectively raise issues of injustice, character, and choice and stimulate considerable discussion. Each adaptation represents a brilliant execution of craft. As Robert Stamm (2005), Linda Hutcheon (2006) and Linda Cahir (2007) all affirm, the idea of adaptation can be broadened. Film adaptation is a useful vehicle for learning in educational settings.

Besides Melville’s obvious place in a survey of nineteenth century American literature, his work finds its place in any humanities or liberal studies course that turns to literature to explore human motivation, action, and selfhood. His work is likewise valuable in any cross-disciplinary class in which literature engages philosophy or psychology. In our case, Melville’s work is included in core classes that usually comprise anywhere from fifteen to two dozen students of traditional college age, as well as some returning adult students. In our class, Melville is placed alongside classic works like The Odyssey. His fiction intersects with Shakespeare, Greek tragic drama, and other significant works that engage us in considering matters of human character and decision-making. A principal theme of my class is journey, the life journey as heroic journey, as in Joseph Campbell’s sense in The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, Ishmael’s adventure, and Captain Ahab’s quest of the great white whale fit well with this theme. The aim and objective of this course is to encourage students to look at their lives- indeed at the human condition- as a journey to selfhood that is reflected in the Great Books. The films of Melville’s novels, Billy Budd and Moby Dick, while differing in some respects from the original texts, are true to the essence of Melville and effectively illustrate the books and open a path to further reading and discussion.

Moby Dick, directed by John Huston (1956) Warner Brothers

The breadth and ambiguity of Herman Melville’s texts are a challenge for any filmmaker, as well as for any teacher. Moby Dick, directed by John Huston (1956), is a case in point. The oceanic canvas of Melville’s Moby Dick is filled with metaphor, myth, Biblical allusions, and the narrative voice of Ishmael.
Melville’s ambiguity is also important to his novel and has to be translated somehow to film. All of this poses problems for the screenwriter, who needs to give attention to character, action, and conflicts. The documentary parts of Melville’s text, which focus on the whaling industry, may seem like icebergs blocking the flow of the narrative and the novel’s dramatic continuity. A film has to move the main story along more quickly than the pace of a whale. Some of my students, accustomed to fast paced movies with special effects, have not found the Huston-Bradbury script (1956) engaging in this sense. However, most find embarking upon reading Melville’s whaling epic a task as formidable as would be sailing to Polynesia in a canoe. The film helps to translate some of the considerable reach of Melville into graspable terms. Indeed, one must learn how to fish before one goes whaling and one must learn to read before one sails on the broad literary sea with Melville. Thus, the film and readings from the novel offer an introduction. The more ambitious can go sailing with Melville’s novel. For those who only view the film, a teacher may need to bring out Melville’s ambiguities and subtleties in class discussion.

There is much power in the Huston film with Gregory Peck in the role of Captain Ahab. Even so, this whale may be elusive to adaptation. “I don’t seek to interpret, to put my own stamp on the material,” John Huston once told interviewer Gideon Bachman. “I try to be as faithful to the original material as I can.” (Sarris, Film Quarterly: 256). Even so, Brandon French argues that much is lacking without Ishmael’s narrative. “Whatever contradiction and complexity Bradbury tries to retain in his script seems forced, heavy-handed, out of place,” he writes. “Moby Dick may forever remain uncapturable in another medium,” Willis E. McNelly and James Stupple remark. Andrew Sarris claimed that John Huston’s Moby Dick (1956) marked a decline in this director’s career. (Sarris, The American Cinema, 157). All of this is arguable. The film illustrates well several aspects of Melville’s novel. It points to key scenes in Melville’s whaling epic, while bringing characters and conflicts vividly to life. The Huston film engages students just enough to get them thinking and stirs up the foam atop Melville’s broad philosophical ocean.

Huston’s film begins with Ishmael’s narrative voice-over, which imitates the beginning of Melville’s novel. Ishmael’s narrative is, however, an element which we soon lose as the film enters its pattern of dramatic scenes. Narration is crucial to Melville’s text, setting the novel’s tone and its rhythm. It disappears in the filmic treatment for obvious reasons. As Al Spiegel wrote in Fiction and the Camera Eye (1976), a film is less a story narrated than action dramatized, sounded, and visualized. Bradbury and Huston faced the challenge of condensing a vast novel and conveying the narrative trajectory almost entirely within dramatic action. They decided against using the voice over throughout the film. Sarah Kozloff, in Invisible Storytellers (1988) argued that “voice over narration’s reputation has suffered from the advantages it offers, such as its facility in conveying expository information.” Bernard Dick, in Anatomy of Film (1990) rejects voice overs as “one of the most abused techniques in film.” In contrast, Avron Fleishman, in Narrated Films (1992), points to a variety of voice-over techniques which may be effective.

If voice-over techniques were to be abandoned, Huston and Bradbury’s adaptation would have to be plot-driven and rely upon sharp characterization. Peck’s Ahab would be a dominating force and Ishmael would be largely submerged among the crew. Starbucks would be a vigorous critic of Ahab’s single-minded quest of the whale. Ishmael’s narrative was to be used minimally. The documentary
aspects of Melville’s novel would have to be dropped. The question of who is the real monster- the whale or Ahab-would have to be approached in a new way: visually, in action, and through dialogue. “Our biggest problem was to turn Melville’s expositional passages into characteristic dialogue,” Huston said.

So how are we to teach these works through their film adaptations? More than one hundred years separate Herman Melville’s 1850 novel and John Huston’s 1956 film. They are clearly different. Yet, despite the differences between script and novel, the film and the book may work well when taught together. Because Huston and Bradbury captured the essence of Melville’s work, their film remains valuable for us as a teaching tool and a conversation starter. It leads us back to Melville’s text and takes us on to a sea of many questions. As a novel, *Moby Dick* is a major undertaking for any reader. A selective reading of chapters may be supplemented by the film. Once the film has been presented, students are more likely to tune in to extended passages read aloud in class. The more ambitious students will take up and read the novel – or at least some of it.

Many scenes from the film give dramatic visual expression to the book. The film brings to vivid life the Spouter Inn. There is a sharply played meeting of Ishmael and Queequeg. The film renders with rousing force the six minutes of Orson Welles’s dramatic sermon as Father Mapple. We see mystic light and feel the tension on deck as Gregory Peck’s Captain Ahab demonically anoints the harpoons and calls for a coin to be hammered to the mast. We witness the heart-wrenching meeting of the Rachel and the Peqod. The ending has been changed, making it visually dramatic: Starbucks kills the whale and Ahab is lashed to the whale for eternity. The dramatic *agon* of the film’s final contest may stimulate discussion of whether the antagonism of Ahab toward the whale is one-sided, or is ever shared by the whale. Students may be gradually led to the perennial questions of Moby Dick, such as: in what sense is the whale symbolic- and of what?

True, the film, shot a half-century ago, for all its merits, may have some things working against it in the classroom. Some young audiences have come to expect the quick pace and digital effects offered by today’s Hollywood films. Huston’s *Moby Dick* is slower and to some the film may seem like a lumbering whale. For young adults weaned on special effects, a willing suspension of disbelief is required along with a tolerance of cumbersome studio models of whales. There is little mystery or majesty in Moby Dick’s on screen appearance as a bulky white blimp of from the Warner Brothers’ prop room. Nor does the film jump out at our young viewers in vivid Technicolor. The film was shot in muted pastel color, chemically desaturated. Critics say this is better on the big screen than on the television screen. However, many scenes work effectively as drama.

There are several obvious differences between the film and the novel. Melville’s novel delays the entrance of Captain Ahab for nearly 200 pages. In the film, Ahab is introduced by sounds on deck and Peck’s appearance after about five minutes. Huston and Bradbury got rid of a major character, Fedallah, who was Captain Ahab’s Parsee confidant. Bradbury believed that anything significant that Fedallah did in the story Ahab could do. “Heave him overboard,” said Huston. With that, the Parsee disappears from the film. Yet, there remain enough characters on board for us to consider the diversity of this crew and how they represent our multi-cultural world. Melville gives us three harpooners from
the indigenous people of three different continents. The most marked difference is the ending in which the primal sea swirls around the battling forms of Ahab and Moby Dick. The film’s final confrontation between man and whale departs from the book. This conflict rises to dramatic intensity. For Huston and Bradbury, the ferocity of Ahab is met by the sheer power of Moby Dick. Blasted by the waves, Ahab bestrides the colossus of the great white whale’s back. Caught in the tangled lines of fate and harpoon wire, he is tethered together to his nemesis for all eternity. In Melville’s story, Ahab is caught by the “igniting velocity” of his rope, perhaps more self-entrapped than anything else. There we read that “ere the crew knew he was gone.”

Rather than getting caught up in the specific differences between film and text, our quest is for the essence of Melville’s story. In our examination of the film and the novel, characters take center stage. We consider the goals and decisions of human beings under pressure. We begin to take measure of the ambitions and purposes of Ahab and the Pequod’s crew members. This brings into focus the action of three major characters: Ishmael, Starbuck, and Ahab. In considering Ishmael, it is useful to discuss Melville’s narrative method and the wide and varied canvas of this novel. Huston’s 1956 film was the first serious undertaking of the challenges of adapting Melville’s work. Its director and screenwriter had to contend with the sheer frothy volume of the novel. This included dramatizing a story in which much narrative is supplied by the character Ishmael. In Melville’s text, Ishmael’s voice offers a sense of movement. He places us in a setting, as we come through New Bedford and see the Spouter Inn. Ishmael later provides us with insights into Ahab’s appearance and manner. This narrative interweaves fact and image with metaphoric prose, symbolism, paradox, folklore and myth. The film, however, is focused upon dramatic action and must let go of the documentary portions of Melville’s novel that provide details of the whaling industry. Ishmael’s voice frames the film, but is sometimes subdued throughout. First person narrative melts away into dialogue and action sequences. It is not clear that Ishmael is a character who develops during the film. However, given our theme of journey, it is useful for us to look at how he is *homo viator*, the pilgrim or wanderer traversing the wide seas.

A reading in class of the first chapters of *Moby Dick* can help us to trace Ishmael’s odyssey. “Call me Ishmael,” he says in film and text, greeting us as an independent journeyman seeking employment on a whaling voyage. Ishmael is our everyman, a character with whom we might identify. Soon he encounters Queequeg and the motley variety of humanity into which he is absorbed. As the film proceeds, we return to Ishmael from time to time. As it concludes, we are left with what we might make of Ishmael. For now he is cast alone upon the waves, a sojourner adrift on that vastness, clinging to Queequeg’s coffin, until the Rachel picks him from the watery waste, like the last of her abandoned children. At the end, he becomes again the existential individual lost at sea, miraculously rescued, welcomed once more into the human community.

Starbuck becomes for us a character whose sense of reason, attitude toward the voyage, and stance toward Ahab’s authority merits examination. In Chapter 73, “The Mushet,” Starbuck, appalled by Ahab’s obsessive quest, agonizes over his responsibilities to the crew and to Ahab’s authority. He seeks divine guidance. Honest and virtuous, Melville’s Starbuck is caught in an emotional storm that the film can only fleetingly convey. Starbuck recognizes that Ahab goes beyond all rational approaches to whaling and all acceptable behavior. He rejects Ahab’s quest as ill-conceived because it puts the entire
crew in danger. The film provides a hint of mutiny, a plan to assassinate Ahab, but Starbuck becomes afraid and backs away from this idea. In the novel, Starbuck deliberates. Ahab’s own comments, in a chapter called “The Symphony,” give Starbuck some hope that he will cease in his pursuit of the white whale. Natural and supernatural signs dissuade Starbuck from action. Starbuck, in the novel is a fulcrum between reason and unreason, whereas in the film he is more strictly a man of action. In the film, Starbuck kills the white whale, an ending that departs markedly from Melville’s novel. Huston and Bradbury’s ending is blunt and dramatic. The ethical first mate, a man of pragmatic purpose, comes to the rescue and vanquishes the white specter of the whale. Melville’s conclusion is shrouded in ambiguity.

Ahab is the most enigmatic character of all. Is he hero or villain? Gregory Peck’s deep voice is turned to the force of command. And let us not forget the whale. We may ask, as Ahab and Moby Dick struggle, who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist? What are we to make of this great white whale? In his text, Melville underscores the whiteness of the whale and evokes its naturalness within the depths of the sea in “the mighty mildness of repose.” The whale, he writes, expresses “gentle joyousness.” Yet, this is in contrast to the film script in which Moby Dick is represented as a harsh adversary that rises from the sea.

For some critics “the movie stays on the surface of Melville’s ideas” (Cahir and Welsh 21). Huston authenticates Melville’s literal details, they say (20). In their view, “The movie is faithful to the letter [...] It is Masterplots in celluloid” (21). Yet, for screenwriter Ray Bradbury, in a recent interview, this script is highly conscious of metaphor. Bradbury has said that he discovered he was essentially a nineteenth century author, loving metaphors (Interview with Bradbury). It is this level of metaphor, symbol, and theme in the film that is worth exploring in the classroom. From our questions, recalling the film, we move to Melville’s text.

Like the whale, it is possible for us to dive beneath the surface. The film provides a starting point for interrogation of the text, or a discussion of themes that may lead us deeper. For example, the theme of the hero, or anti-hero, engages much of our class time. Is Ahab heroic, or archetypally the dark anti-hero? If he is the latter, do Starbuck or Ishmael embody the heroic instead? Or, is Moby Dick in some way heroic, transcendent, or fundamentally primal? Our discussions may turn philosophical. For example, Moby Dick causes us to consider the primal forces that humanity encounters when we meet the apparently benevolent, or harsh, or simply indifferent aspects of nature. Or, we may turn to the ecological in our discussion and ask about our current stance toward nature. Is Moby Dick the natural world’s response to human hubris? Is global warming, flooding and tsunamis, or other potential ecological havoc analogous? Alternatively, we might think about Ahab’s revenge, or reflect upon authority and leadership, or about our own purposes and what we pursue in life. We might consider what the differing attitudes of Melville’s Ahab and Starbuck may suggest about our motives when our work mingles with commerce or with ambition.

The upper division English major may be able to read and navigate a fair portion of Melville’s novel. However, most students may be best served small portions of Melville’s poetic prose. It is unlikely that they will read the novel entire, so some reading and a taste of Melville’s style may contribute to
their thinking. For example, one might turn to Ahab’s fierce monologue in Chapter 37, which is followed by Starbuck’s point of view in his monologue in Chapter 38. Here Starbuck, the voice of reason, questions how “the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut.” Perhaps the film will tie some students to Melville long enough for them to develop the curiosity to exploring the broad oceans of his talent and vision and the questions he raises for us all.

*Billy Budd*, directed by Peter Ustinov (1962) Allied Artists

Melville’s work may also be introduced effectively by turning to his shorter fiction. In addition to stories like “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Benito Cereno” that often are anthologized for introduction to literature classes, there is Melville’s powerful short novel, *Billy Budd*. Peter Ustinov’s film, starring Terence Stamp and Robert Ryan, provides a valuable introduction. The film echoes a call to duty and moral concern and is useful for bringing out thought on justice and rights issues. Melville has placed his characters in an existential trap, which Ustinov’s film draws clearly. In the film there is no easy solution, only Captain Vere’s eloquence. It is to Ustinov’s credit that this film takes on war, impressment and imprisonment with a view to human rights. Like Melville’s novel, the film foregrounds ethical reasoning. In its trial scene it posits a consequentialist principle alongside a consideration of a moral imperative. The final section of the film, like Melville’s story, investigates whether the case is best judged on the basis of a prescribed and written code, a useful communal result, or a moral obligation to act in good conscience. It further asks whether human nature and the good is based in natural rights and natural law, or is otherwise constituted. Films like this, enlisting the sympathy and challenging thought, can stimulate student reflection. Such reasoning can assist them in building their skills. Benjamin Ferencz, former counsel at the Nuremberg Trials, writes of the need to educate “to develop logical and ethical perceptions”, an education for peace and human rights. “There must be an end to the glorification of killing and the glory of a particular ruler or sect.” This film supports this kind of inquiry.4

The process of adaptation has shifted some of the character’s names. Among the crew, we now have Jenkins, who wrestles with Billy and later falls as a sick man from the foretop. The names and positions have been shifted for Jenkins and Kincaid, who would try to right this injustice with retribution against Claggart. The ship itself has been renamed from the S.S. Indomitable and Bellipotent of Melville’s text to the S.S. Avenger. It is relatively easy to see which students have picked this up and which have copied something from Spark Notes or another online source. The latter frequently write “Indomitable” and don’t show much evidence of having read Melville’s text itself. However, it is possible for some students to engage in the issues advanced by the film.

Film gives us visual images in the form of the actors who play the roles of these characters. Billy, played by Terence Stamp, is an angelic blonde framed in group shots.5 His face is filled with light. He becomes a community’s center. Once he has been charged with the crime Billy is seen below deck, pushed to the edges of the picture. He is marginalized by the mechanism of military justice. Robert Krasner’s camera shots of Budd and Claggart on deck show Budd halved in light and Claggart beset by shadow. Stamp’s blond hair waves in the breeze above cheek-bones filled with light. In contrast, Robert Ryan’s Claggart is intense, dusky, a figure in dark shadows, mysterious and inscrutable.6 He is introduced
into scenes by a booted foot, a dark backside, a fragmented man, repressed, expressionistic, tortured. This highlights for viewers the stark contrast between good and evil that is at the core of Melville’s story.

The story focuses upon Captain Vere’s decisions. Yet the visual language accentuates the experiences of Billy Budd. Early in the film, the blonde, young merchant sailor Billy waves farewell to the merchant ship from which he has been taken and calls out “Goodbye to you too, oh, Rights of Man!” He is slapped by the whiplike response of the British officer, “What do you mean by that, boy?” As the boat pulls alongside the man o’war, the camera tilts up across the motley assembly on the deck. We look up at shoes, baggy pants and grizzled faces: the shadows that we are about to enter along with Billy. Immediately afterward the crew gathers to watch the brutal justice of the lashing of a miscreant. This provides an opportunity for establishing shots of the main characters: Vere, Claggart, his henchman Squeak, Jenkins, Kincaid, Dansker, and Billy Budd. Billy looks off into the distance at the departing Rights of Man receding from view on the open sea. Impressed into duty under the articles of war, he is plunged into a Hobbesian world of all against all on the British vessel. Human rights are in peril on board this fighting ship, on which its crew represents the human community, often at odds. For this is a world filmed in black and white, in which rule of law does not permit shades of gray. It is a world teetering on the waves of compassion, rights, and violence, where justice is subsumed under code. It is this strict adherence to the letter of the law that is manipulated by the malevolent master at arms, Mr. Claggart who Captain Vere sees as a troubling “force for order.” (“The Rights of Man,” says Billy’s crew member Jenkins. “You come off a ship named that?”) In Melville’s stories, “civilized” life covers the lack of a moral core.

Early in the film, following the flogging, the new arrival Billy Budd’s sharp eye to eye contact with Claggart sets forth the hint that a conflict between them might be ahead. We are brought below into the mess hall where the men introduce themselves to Billy. Jenkins’s introduction is a hostile challenge to a fight, to “baptize him in the ways of the world.” This struggle stimulates the drama and demonstrates that Billy can hold his own and fight forcefully. “Well, I’ll let you off this time,” says Jenkins who has fallen and rubs his chin, assuaging his wounded pride. The crew and the ship represent a conflicted world, one heals in part by Billy’s compassion and naive sympathy. The ship is a place of ceaseless conflict where human freedom is circumscribed by “law” and force. It is a proto-social Darwinian world of struggle for survival of “the fittest.” After this mess-hall scuffle, we witness the “fall of man” in Jenkins’s sick and tumbling descent from a high spar. Vere is faced with a time of peril and rumors of mutiny. Yet, he has to rely upon Claggart’s enforcement of law, although he finds Claggart despicable, perverse in his enjoyment of seeing men whipped. “Claggart is a force for order. He is the best master of arms I’ve ever had.” The action moves toward a knife fight in which Billy prevents a crewmate, Kincaid, from avenging himself on Claggart. We are well-prepared for the final showdown. Billy, who is impaired by a stutter each time he encounters an assault upon human dignity, is falsely accused by Claggart of fomenting mutiny among the men. Infuriated, wounded, and stunned beyond words by the injustice of this, Billy, unable to speak, lashes out with a blow that causes Claggart to fall heavily to the floor of the captain’s quarters. Then Claggart’s dazed face stretches into a final smile, one eerily satisfied to have trapped and doomed Billy Budd.
The matter of legal punishment which follows turns on issues of obligation and responsibility to insure social order. As students reason through the arguments presented in this scene, they may gain a lesson in leadership and decision making. The deterrence argument is raised: that this is part of the social education of the men on board. The retributivist position is also presented: that one who is responsible for a crime must pay for it proportionally. This gives the film’s audience much to think about. Likely, they have been moved by Terence Stamp’s portrayal of the innocent sailor. Like the officer Radcliffe, they may feel, “we are only men and pity must move us.” Students engaged by the film will address other issues: When are people the victims of official venality? When is the punishment overly harsh? Yet, we cannot abolish our punitive institutions. The results here are complicated by Vere’s paternalistic relation to Billy Budd. His punishment deprives Billy of life because the code calls for it. As he says, “the punishment is prescribed.”

The camera’s view of Captain Vere’s quarters often subtly shows the ship tilting, attempting to balance on the waves. This is the world that Aristotle points to when he says that virtue is the golden mean. Ustinov’s Captain Vere himself is a counterweight between Claggart and crew seeking to maintain balance. The film itself achieves some balance by the way its narrative is framed. The story’s ending, Billy’s hanging, is craftily foreshadowed in Ustinov’s film by the sailor’s song at the outset: “They call him the Hanging Johnny.” While aboard The Rights of Man, Billy Budd is introduced to us by a call from the merchant ship’s captain, “Billy, Billy Budd! Give us a song!” The same tune subtly returns at the film’s center, hummed in the night by the bass voice of Dansker, who crosses the length of darkness on deck with his lantern. This film is also framed by a narrative voice that concludes with its own interpretation and summary. I ask my students to challenge this view by entering into the ambiguity of the film and Melville’s story.

The voice-over conclusion of the film assures us that if the sacrifice of Billy Budd has taught us the lasting value of justice then he has not died in vain. However, Melville’s ambiguity ought not to be swallowed up in this neat verbal conclusion. The last visual images we see are of Captain Vere’s hand beneath the fallen mast and the rubble on deck and the floating of the ship’s broken masthead. The film’s visual ending suggests that there are no survivors left to tell the story of Billy Budd. We who have seen this film and have perhaps also read the story are left to interpret whether the ship’s fate has had anything to do with Captain Vere’s decision. Does the French ship emerging from behind the rocks upon Billy’s hanging express nemesis? Billy Budd may be read as a story of the denial of human rights within the codes of institutional, Billy has been placed on trial for responding to Claggart’s insinuations with a fatal blow. Captain Vere (truth) interrogates the case and resigns himself to a fatalistic worldview. “So you see, Seymour, that this world began long before our time.” “And will end long after it,” Seymour replies. There is no way out for these naval officers who, bound by a code, stare into the abyss with their consciences. “I can’t stand by and see an innocent man hanged,” Lieutenant Wyatt cries out. “My blood is not cold enough for that!” “Then reason with us, Wyatt,” says Captain Vere to the youngest of the officers. “Show us how to save the boy. Can you do it?” That is the challenge which can then be placed before our students: what would you do?

The tragedy of Billy Budd, like Greek dramas, is intended to move its audience. Its central characters Billy Budd and Captain Vere are largely sympathetic characters. Billy Budd is an innocent
everyman who is being sent to his doom by adherence to the letter of the law. Indeed, Billy lost his rights when he stepped off of *The Rights of Man*. However, he has taught dignity to the captain, his officers, and every member of the crew. Soon beloved by the crew Billy embodies living concern for them all, an innocence and goodness that Claggart cannot bear. In Claggart’s deracinated world-view life is mercilessly antagonistic. He is challenged by the naïve purity of Billy’s childlike world. In the poignant scene between Claggart and Billy Budd on deck in the moonlight, Claggart’s world view emerges clearly as he speaks to Budd: “You say the ocean is calm tonight,” Claggart says, bathed in half-shadow to the brightly lit Billy Budd, “Calm and peaceful above, but underneath a world of gliding monsters, preying on their fellows.” Indeed, while Claggart is portrayed by Ryan as darkest evil, he steadily suggests the inscrutable mystery in the troubled character of the master at arms.

Finally, something should be said about the cultural moment in which the film appeared. The time was ripe for westerns and detective film noir stories that would set the world right after the chaos and destruction of the Second World War. Certainly, if the film had appeared at the end of 1963 the loss of JFK might have struck a cultural chord in America. A story of lost innocence may have then been more poignant. By 1964, Terence Stamp had taken his first film role as a villain. However, his 1962 *Billy Budd* reflects attitudes of post-WWII heroism. *Billy Budd* gives us an all male cast reflective of military activity in Europe and the Pacific. The film turns upon a search for law and conscience. It puts forth a theme of solidarity: the dignity of the common man, a quest for justice in the face of evil. The 1950’s was filled with this in film, in its noir detectives, in its westerns, and in the search to set society right again. The 1945 United Nations Charter supported the codification of international law. In 1948 emerged the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The General Assembly was intended to settle conflicts “in conformity with the principles of justice and international law.” In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” This declaration lingers behind this 1962 film.

While filmed some six years apart, Huston’s *Moby Dick* and Ustinov’s *Billy Budd* treat Melville’s multi-layered stories thoughtfully. If we look to the dramatic heart of these films, they illuminate the human struggle we see in the novels. These films interpret Herman Melville’s novels in visual and dramatic ways that can enhance a students’ experience of Melville’s fiction. Viewing these films with critical attention, students may entertain reflection about human character and choices. Through Ishmael or Billy Budd, they may reflect upon whether our lives are ones of aimless wandering or purposeful journey. Through Starbuck or Captain Vere’s officers, they may think about issues of justice. Melville draws us to ask in what sense we are a human community and in what sense “we are all Isolatoes, each living on a separate continent of his own.” The films provide an entry point for discussion of the ethical claims in Melville’s work, although these are surrounded by the ambiguity of a tragic world-view in which he ever questions the human, the divine, and whether the good prevails. *Moby Dick* by Huston and *Billy Budd* by Ustinov draw our attention to critical issues of human responsibility, reflections on the rights of person and nature, and the journey to selfhood we all share.
Notes

1. The connection analogy between Plato’s cave and the movie theatre has also been observed by critics from Andre Buzin, Jean-Louis Baudry and Luce Irigaray, as Robert Stam points out in “Antecedents to Film Theory” in Film Theory: An Introduction (Blackwell, 2005).

2. Moby Dick has been adapted to film in a variety of ways, beginning with the 1926 silent film The Sea Monster starring John Barrymore which developed a romantic plot and has Ahab killing the whale and coming home to his romantic love. A notable attempt to bring Moby Dick to the television screen was a 1998 film with Patrick Stewart in the role of Ahab. A French film, by director Philippe Ramos, appeared in 2003 and 2007.


4. Ustino’s film followed a process of adaptation that moved from Melville’s novel to Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman’s 1948 stage play to his film. His film adaptation was clearly influenced also by Benjamin Britten’s opera Billy Budd, with a book by E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier. In 1948, shortly after the Second World War, the Louis Coxe and Robert Chapman play Uniform of Flesh appeared. The play was revised and arrived on Broadway in 1951. There were several made for television versions. Ustino’s script follows the pattern of these previous adaptations. In 1962, Ustino’s film continued to speak to a generation that had known the Second World War. This audience, now concerned with the Cold War, faced issues of courage, dignity, and freedom.

5. In his 1977 autobiography, Ustino says that he “gave the part of Billy Budd, the embodiment of good, to an unknown-a hesitant, uncertain young actor named Terence Stamp.” See Peter Ustinov, Dear Me (Boston and London: Little Brown, 1977, p. 311).

6. Robert Ryan came to the role of the evil Claggart from the shadows of film noir, the war film, and the western. Interested in playing the part, he contacted Ustinov. The story may have appealed to his interest in the Greek classics, which he had studied at Dartmouth. As Claggart, the actor is a convincing sadist with a face that Joseph Friel calls “world-weary.” However, this role was in considerable contrast from Ryan’s own civil rights commitments and peacemaking values. He was married to a practicing Quaker.

7. Ustinov, as a director, considered Billy Budd his best film. He was hesitant, however, to play the role of Captain Edward Fairfax Vere. “I did not want to play him at all,” Ustinov said. “I don’t think I’m straight enough […] in my cocked hat I look rather like a Russian china mantelpiece decoration” (Thomas, 144.) Peter Ustinov’s Captain Vere carries with Shakespearian articulateness some of the film’s finest speeches. He carries the weight of authority and, as one critic noted, his own “excessive avoirdupois.” Donald Zee in the London Daily Mirror called Ustinov a “chubby faced comic trying to get out” (September 19, 1962). In her review of the film, Pauline Kael sees Ustinov’s directing as having “a cleanness and narrative mood” which
complements Robert Krasner’s “stylized, controlled photography” (211). While critically acclaimed, Ustinov’s film did not do particularly well at the box office. The film “never made the waves it should have” wrote Tony Thomas (143).

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