Power and Resistance in Herman Melville’s Three B’s

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Abstract

This essay examines three of Herman Melville’s shorter fictions: *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*. An analysis and comparison is made of the forces of power relations and resistance between the main characters in the three stories. Foucault’s theories of power are used as a basis for the analysis. Apparent power structures such as law and military hierarchy are analysed, but the focus is on more subtle relations based on language, knowledge, conformity with norms, silence, capitalism and position. It is argued that, apart from the apparent power structures, one needs to consider the more subtle power relations and acts of resistance for an understanding in the shifts of power positions. The study examines how the resisting oppressed party in each of the three works of fiction ends up dead, and that on a first reading resistance may seem futile. A further examination of the seemingly re-established conventional order, however, reveals shifts in power positions, shifts that indicate instability in the norms of society. It is argued that positions of power are to some extent reversed in the studied works of fiction, where the dominant party ends up suffering.

**Keywords:** Herman Melville, *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno*, *Billy Budd*, power relations, resistance, Michel Foucault
Each of Melville’s three B’s, the shorter works of fiction *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, addresses different subjects and take place in three different worlds, but there is a mutual tension of opposing forces in all three literary works. However, few have compared the three narratives in the same analysis using the same perspective. A comparison of the three B’s using the same perspective can shed light on, and give an understanding of, Melville’s evocative characters, both on an institutional level, but also more specifically of the individual characters in each of the three works of fiction.

Barbara Johnson problematizes the many different possible readings of *Billy Budd*, and one conclusion is that the “relation between the two [opposing forces is] the fundamental question of all human politics” (106 original emphasis), which makes the story both enigmatic and compelling. The fundamental question of the “relation between” is not only relevant for *Billy Budd*, but also for *Bartleby* and *Benito Cereno*. The “opposing forces” of ambiguity and binary conflict come to life in the narratives through characters who are, for different reasons, oppressed by coded or un-coded power structures, and the resistance exercised by the oppressed party. Hence, the perspective of my analysis is the critical relation between the opposing forces of power and resistance.

First, I will discuss the power relations in each of the three stories, which will be followed by an analysis of the opposing forces of resistance, and finally, I will present a study of the results of the conflict between power and resistance. The discussion is based on Michel Foucault’s power relation theories. The perspective of

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1 Full name of this short story is *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (a scrivener works as a copyist)
2 Full name of this novel is *Billy Budd, Sailor*
Foucault’s power instruments have very rarely been used in analyses of Melville’s stories, which is surprising as power relations are critical for his narratives. One of the few examples is Edward Ahearn’s analysis of *Bartleby*. However, Ahearn’s focus is mainly on an institutional level, instead of the level of human power relations that I discuss. I aim to analyse the power relations and their significance for our understanding of the three stories. I will further argue that the seemingly futile resistance manages to shift the positions of power of the stories’ privileged parties.

**Power relations**

The subject of power relations is a major theme in all three works of fiction. *Benito Cereno* tells the story of a slave rebellion on board Captain Don Benito Cereno’s ship the San Dominick. In an effort to aid the passengers on the distressed ship, Captain Delano boards the ship where the rebellion is disguised, a charade controlled by the rebel leader Babo. The rebellion is finally uncovered, the rebels are beaten down and taken to court, where they receive the death penalty. The power structures of the juridical system, and those of the slave owner’s supremacy are victorious and the order of the ruling party seems to be restored. Similarly, Bartleby’s passivity at the lawyer’s office on a Wall Street address seems, on a first reading, not to have changed the structures of the forces at play. Bartleby upsets the structures by “preferring not to” be productive in the office. The lawyer finally leaves Bartleby to his own devices, and, lacking a better alternative, Bartleby is put in prison, away from the power structures of the finance world. He instead finds himself in jail, sentenced by the power of the law. Billy Budd was impressed from a merchant ship to serve on a warship that had “been obliged to put to sea short of her proper complement of men” (105). Billy finds himself being harassed by Claggart, the master-at-arms on board. Being of lower rank, and horrified at the thought of potential punishment, Billy tries to stay out of the way and “do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof” (123). When he is falsely accused of mutiny, he gets stressed and all he manages to do is to punch Claggart, who falls down dead. The captain, Captain Vere, manages the process that gets Billy hanged. The rigid power structures of military hierarchy and military laws escort Billy from his impressment to his hanging.

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3 Henceforth all references are, unless otherwise indicated, to texts in *Melville’s short novels* edited by Dan McCall, which includes the three discussed fictions, *Bartleby, the Scrivener, Benito Cereno, and Billy Budd, Sailor.*
The power structures of property, law, capitalism and military hierarchy serve as explanations in a conventional reading of the three stories. However, these explanations cannot match the reader’s feeling of uneasiness in the treatment of Billy, or Bartleby, or Babo. Nor can they explain why resistance is present in the first place, whether this opposing force of resistance modifies the structures of power, or whether they heal and remain unchanged. For a better understanding of the power relations at play, we need to look at more complex structures. The study of power, power structures and power relations is strongly associated with Michel Foucault. He states:

The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes. It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation (Sexuality 92)

Hence, a reading of Melville’s three stories which only considers the “terminal forms of power”, such as law or military rank, will not give access to the more complex forces at play. These complex force relations end up “forming a dense web” (Foucault, Sexuality 96), more complex than the evident power structures of law, economics or military hierarchy. It is in the “relation between” (Johnson 106) that these forces are at play, in the power relations between subjects or between subject and object. For an understanding of the powers at play in Melville’s three fictions, we therefore need to analyse the power relations which are part of the “dense web”. This includes the “terminal forms” of power, but, more importantly, also other power relations found in the complex web of forces in the social spheres where the characters are situated.

**Benito Cereno**

In *Benito Cereno*, the power structures between slave and his master are the basis for the novella. This relationship is one based on possession, one where the master has “the right to decide life and death” (Foucault, Sexuality 135). Power, in a conventional approach, is exercised in a top-down manner. Foucault, however, recognises that power arises between individuals in all relationships (Lynch 13). Even Babo, a slave, can exercise a certain degree of freedom, as proven by the rebellion. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the emergence of prisons and how the system turns the eye from the crime to the criminal. This turns the focus on the psychology of the person
rather than on his deeds, a change that “rests on a historical transformation” (Foucault, *Discipline* 209). The historical context is fundamental in Foucault’s theory of power and discipline. Todd May explains how the making of a psychological being “creates a conformity and blunts the possibility of either social resistance or experimentation with other forms of living” (77). This creation of individuals whose possibility of resistance has been psychologically blunted, can explain how a minority of masters can control a majority of slaves. The power relationship is heavily biased in one direction. However, one basic principle of Foucault’s theories is the presence of resistance whenever there is a power relationship (Foucault, *Sexuality* 95). Through this resistance, “power relations can always be altered” (Lynch 24). Babo is the leader of the rebellion on board San Dominick, a position he gets due to his intelligence: his head is a “hive of subtlety” (102). His intelligence, combined with his leadership skills and ability to see possibilities, is the pre-requisite that ignites the rebellion. He not only fights the white sailors, but, more importantly, he exercises power in an attempt to cast away the shackles of historical context and to fight the discourse of conformity that his psychological being is trapped within. Babo’s capabilities at the same time create a trap that is set for Captain Delano, a trap orchestrated by Melville, a trap that keeps the reader uneasy. As the master-mind of Babo is uncovered, so is the cruelty of slavery, and so are the cruel acts of the rebellion. Melville does not glorify or justify one or the other, but Foucault’s theories give one possible explanation to Babo’s resistance to the power imbalance he is subject to. He demonstrates one of Foucault’s propositions in that power is exercised, not possessed (Foucault, *Sexuality* 94). Historical legacy can be changed, and even though the rebellion is quashed, Babo has challenged the power relationships. Even though a first reading may not reveal any tangible results from this challenge, it shows that a growing grain of resistance can be found even in very unbalanced power relationships.

In a conversation, after the trial and the deposition of Don Benito, Delano asks: “You are saved, … what has cast such a shadow upon you?”, whereupon Don Benito answers: “The negro” (101). This ends their conversation for the day. Don Benito has been made to act the master on the ship where he up until the rebellion was the actual master. Joyce Sparer Adler points out that Don Benito’s answer expresses how he has developed an understanding of the conditions of slavery (103). By enacting his own role under the supervision and orchestration of Babo, Don Benito
experienced his master role from a perspective where he was distanced from the norms he had previously not had to question. At the same time, he was subject to being the oppressed party with an imminent death threat over, not only his, but also the heads of the surviving white people. Don Benito has, by this firsthand and terrifying experience, received an insight into the results of the slave trade and its forces of oppression. The structures at work can be examined in the light of position. In Foucauldian terms, power is exercised as a mandate afforded to a certain position, not to a certain individual (Foucault, *Discipline* 181, Feder 59). After the rebellion, Don Benito no longer occupies his position of authority. He is still the same person, but in a different position, with a different social role, and under circumstances where he is required to see the world from a different perspective. At the same time, he has to act his earlier position, but with constraints dictated by the former slave Babo. As the ultimate token of authority, Babo has the power to decide if he lives or dies. Don Benito is in his position a possession, in the same way that slaves are possessed by their masters. Don Benito’s new role gives him a firsthand experience of the injustices related to slavery and this changes him permanently.

On board the San Dominick, even Delano feels uncomfortable at times, he feels that something is amiss, but he is unable to decipher his intuitions. At one point, he imagines that Don Benito together with the whites have a secret plot, and he asks himself: “[C]ould then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they [are] too stupid.” (63). His view of the world is blocked by the norms of society. He is shaped by power relations, relations that are “a complex arrangement of forces in society” (Lynch 21). These forces are not described as structures or institutions, but rather as immanent forces, or as May describes Foucault’s theory: “one does not even consider alternatives to what are presented as the available social options” (77). It is evident that Delano cannot see an option where the blacks are not “stupid”, and where they would have arranged the secret plot. Nor does Delano seem to have changed his understanding of the “forces in society” after having been given insight to the nature of the plot. Delano cannot understand why a shadow lingers on Don Benito despite his being saved. Delano says:

… the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, you bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”

“Because they have no memory,” he [Don Benito] dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.”
“But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, Don Benito, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades.”

“With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, Senor,” was the foreboding response. (101)

Delano states how his understanding of the oppressive forces has not changed, indeed he has no understanding of these forces at all, they are not part of his repertoire. He is unable to see any alternatives, he is firmly rooted in society’s norms and power relations that define the issue of slavery, or, as expressed by the court proceedings, he is “incapable of sounding such wickedness” (98) as was the true state of affairs. His recipe is to forget the whole episode and move forward with his life, in the same way that inanimate objects like the sun, sea and sky do. These objects silently accept both the past, the present and the future without either reflection or moral or guilt. Similarly, Delano states that he has no lingering impressions left of the drama on board San Dominick and cannot see a need for reflection. Dennis Pahl argues that Delano practices “active forgetfulness” (181) as a way to preserve his “safe, privileged existence” (181). I would, however, argue that the mere necessity to contemplate on the affair shows a need for reflection. Friederich Nietzsche discusses forgetting of events in terms of happiness: “it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration” (62). Nietzsche, at the same time, recognises that the capacity for both “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (63 original italics). Delano’s life was saved “against [his] knowledge and will” (100) and he attributes this to “Providence” (101). He seeks an explanation for feelings, immanent feelings, that he cannot understand. Something is not right, a feeling he recognises from his visit on board San Dominick where something was not right either, and he searches in vain for an explanation. His need for an explanation indicates that he is to some degree haunted by the experience. Nietzsche explains how “the past returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment” (61). Delano’s eagerness for an explanation indicates a return of the ghost, the memory, that haunts him. The power relations that have shaped his adherence to norms and conformity have indeed changed, even though his own awareness of this change is not evident.
Don Benito, on the other hand, has undergone a revelationary, permanent, and conscious change. He claims that inanimate objects are not representative as “they are not human”. At the same time he implicitly claims that a human response cannot allow one to forget, or accept, the inhumane structures that advocate the slave trade. His view of the power relations which are the norms of the discourse of his reality have changed. His new view cannot be reversed, and it troubles him. Delano speaks of the trade winds as healing forces, but to Don Benito these trade winds are the winds that bring a constant flow of slave trade ships to the American continent (Altschuler 302), a trade which “wafts [Don Benito] to [his] tomb”. The trade brings death, not only to Don Benito, but also death and destruction in general. Don Benito responds that the negro has cast a shadow over him, and does not explain further other than through his silence. During his captivity and his pretense on San Dominick, he was forced to play a part and could not tell the truth. His silence became the only truth. Louise Barnett expresses this as: “The reality of ’the negro’ reduces Cereno to silence and death, for there are no words to square his experience with society’s official doctrines of black tractability and inferiority” (62). Don Benito cannot stand to see the world through the lens of his revelation, a revelation that exposes power relations with inhumanity and injustice, and instead he retreats to a silent monastery where he eventually meets his death.

After the rebels are captured, they are brought to “justice”. Here, authority and power is exercised by a judge and the documented history is a recording of what is deemed to be the true story. Don Benito gives his testimony when in a state where he is “broken in body and mind” (100), and he says that he cannot give account for all events, “but that, what he has said is the most substantial of what occurs to him at present” (99). Despite this, the record is treated as “the truth” and it provides sufficient evidence to sentence the slave rebels to the death penalty. Pahl argues that the court and Captain Delano, who are “in control of the rules[,] … are thus intent on judging others strictly in accordance with what best enables them to maintain their own power” (181). The sovereign king of past centuries has been replaced with “the right of the social body” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 137). The knowledge “permeating [that] historical period … shapes the explicit knowledge … that is institutionalized in the disciplines that make up the human sciences” (Feder 55), and hence law is also shaped by this explicit, common knowledge. The discourse of the juridical system is one where this common knowledge is institutionalised and codified through language.
The judge is sovereign in his domain, based on his position, which in turn has its status based on the institutionalisation of common knowledge, “knowledge [that] can only exist with the support of arrangements of power” (Feder 56). Foucault insists that “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (*Discipline* 194). The “truth” of the court and the “justice” it serves is the “truth” and “justice” of the dominant power relations, and Babo, in his confrontation with the juridical system, opts to be silent. The “truth” is already known to the court and his voice will not change the “rituals of truth”.

*Bartleby*

What makes the story of *Bartleby* possible is the concept of productivity, or, as is the case of Bartleby, an employee who is not productive. Such behaviour would be expected to be subject to disciplinary measures, or as Foucault names it, disciplinary power, which serves as a “coercive link with the apparatus of production” (*Discipline* 153). With the emergence of capitalism and division of labour, the necessity of surveillance of the workers became a “decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power” (Foucault, *Discipline* 175). The lawyer places Bartleby near his own desk to have easy access to his services, but even though he is nearby, Bartleby sits behind a screen. This is in contrast to the other employees, who are not as near, but can be monitored through glass walls. There is much similarity with the Bentham’s Panopticon discussed in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, where an all-seeing gaze keeps the prisoners under control. The lawyer controls his other employees by having the option to gaze through the glass wall, but the lawyer cannot control Bartleby who, despite being nearby, is out of sight. Each time Bartleby’s services are required he retires behind his screen, outside the reach of the lawyer’s gaze, thereby exercising his passive rebellion.

The lawyer describes himself as someone who is convinced “that the easiest way of life is the best” (4). As Bartleby’s refusal to work is not easy to understand, and to make the decision to fire him would not be the “easy way of life”, the lawyer decides to postpone the decision time and time again. The reasons given by the lawyer are that there was nothing “ordinarily human” (11) about Bartleby, and the lawyer also claims to be occupied by his busy work schedule. Bartleby continues not to “prefer” to do certain tasks, then a few more, and in the end he does no work at all. The lawyer now has an employee who produces nothing, and at the same time he
finds out that Bartleby has taken up permanent residence in the office. He again makes more attempts to have Bartleby quit and leave the office, which he also “prefer[s] not to”. Bartleby’s passive rebellion “not only disarmed [him] but unmanned [him]” 16. The power as an employer that the lawyer holds over Bartleby is to no avail. The most severe punishment is to fire the employee, but even this method is of no help as Bartleby “prefers not to” leave the office. The normal disciplinary power of the lawyer is incapacitated, Bartleby does not play by the rules and the lawyer thereby lacks the means to get rid of Bartleby. Power relations other than the conventional ones are at play.

The lawyer’s office has a Wall Street address, an address that implies certain customs and norms. These norms can be described in terms of power relations, relations that constrain the possible choices that can be made. These power relations are clarified by Foucault as: “… power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Sexuality 93). The particular society in this case is Wall Street, and when the lawyer understands that there is a rumour among his peers, “a whisper of wonder … having reference to the strange creature [he] kept in [his] office … [, it] worrie[s] [him] very much” (27). His concern for Bartleby’s well-being vanishes, his own position amongst his peers and clients is more precious and valuable. He leads an easy life in comfort and financial safety, and he wishes to continue doing so. Self-preservation and fear to oppose the norms on Wall Street overturn his earlier belief that he is content to care for Bartleby. Obviously the “complex strategical situation” of power relations on Wall Street assumes that employees shall be productive, whether they prefer to or not. Bartleby’s presence challenges these power relations, the customs and norms of Wall Street. He becomes a “strange creature”, rather than someone who is unproductive, an epithet that conveys the difficulty in managing him. These power relations of the financial community are a strong force and they are what finally push the lawyer to make the decision to part ways with Bartleby. Bartleby’s opposing forces are outside the prevailing customs and norms, and he evokes feelings of strangeness, feelings that do not belong in a law office on Wall Street.

Bartleby’s presence in the office when new tenants arrive becomes a nuisance. The landlord seeks the help of the lawyer, but Bartleby still “prefer[s] not to” leave the premises. The landlord turns to the juridical system and Bartleby is imprisoned.
This is not the procedure the lawyer “would have decided upon” (31), but at the same time he finds this to be “the only plan” (31). The lawyer still remains indecisive regarding a solution to the dilemma Bartleby has created for him, and by changing addresses for his office he temporarily avoided the dilemma. Even after the imprisonment, when the lawyer has confirmed that Bartleby is “a perfectly honest man” (31), he states that something less harsh than prison could be found, “though indeed [he] hardly knew what” (31). Bartleby would be free to leave the prison, but no one knows what to do and Bartleby himself does not offer any proposals. The juridical system is the last resort to store away Bartleby by a society that cannot understand, nor accept, his eccentricities.

Foucault describes the emergence of prisons and how this institution changes punishment from reliance on violence in pre-modern times to one where surveillance and visibility of the inmate is what enforces “the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline* 201). Bartleby spends his time outside his cell in the courtyard where he can be observed, “from their narrow slits of the jail windows, … [by] murderers and thieves” (31). This is a reversal of roles in Foucault’s description of Bentham’s Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*. The inspector in the Panopticon is replaced by “murderers and thieves”. The efficiency of the Panopticon rests on the principle that the one:

subjected to a field of visibility … assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault, *Discipline* 202-03)

In the prison yard, Bartleby is the object of the gazes from the “narrow slits”, and at the same time he is the subject of his own control. He is the inspector of himself. This method where the convict becomes his own inspector, according to Foucault, “constrain[s] the convict to good behaviour, … the worker to work” (*Discipline* 202). In Bartleby’s world, the gazes of “murderers and thieves”, does not “constrain” him to productivity. Instead, as he stares on the prison wall from the prison courtyard, he is the inspector of only himself, with no benefit from the powers invested in correcting his behaviour.
**Billy Budd**

Billy Budd and Claggart are portrayed as different, basically dichotomous, personalities in the novel. The opposing forces between them are what create suspense. Billy, also called the Handsome Sailor due to his innocent and good looks, had “little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of the wisdom of the serpent … to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge” (110). There is no evil in Billy and he sees the world for what it is appears to be, and, in his naïve and honest disposition, he spreads joy, peace and good humour on board the ship. Further, he is “a fine specimen of the *genus homo*” (142), strong and muscular, attributes that are well-liked on a large sailboat with three masts where a sailor’s day is filled with hard, physical work. In contrast to Billy’s personality, we find the master-at-arms, John Claggart:

> With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart’s, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it. (130)

Claggart is the evil scorpion, and he cannot help it, this is his innate personality and he lacks the power to be anything else. He is street-wise enough to be able to hide it, but it is nevertheless always present, it draws energy “from a different source” (129) in comparison to Billy’s innocence. Claggart intuitively takes an instant dislike to Billy, and, since his mean streak “is in the heart not the brain” (129), his feeling of “envy and antipathy” (129) towards Billy cannot be reasoned with, even though Claggart is bestowed with the intellectual capacity. Melville describes how Claggart develops a hatred against Billy, Claggart envies him for his goodness, a goodness whose existence Claggart can perceive, but, with his evil disposition, never appreciate.\(^4\) Claggart devises a plan where Billy is falsely accused of mutiny. This accusation is put forward to Captain Vere. Amongst his many qualities, Captain Vere, “in earnest encounter with a fellow man, [is] a veritable touchstone of that man’s essential nature” (143). He distrusts Claggart and already has a clear picture of Billy’s good and harmless nature, and when Billy is confronted with the accusation the

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\(^4\) In Johnson’s deconstruction of *Billy Budd*, she argues that Melville’s descriptions of Claggart’s nature are an “infinite regress of knowledge” (94) and a reading must fill in the gaps of language, gaps that can be seen as “triggers for interpretation” (94). In this reading, Billy’s stutter instead “mark[s] the spot from which evil springs” (95) and the narrator’s descriptions should thus not be taken at face value.
captain also very quickly understands the nature of Billy’s speech impediment. Billy, under sudden provocation, develops “a stutter or even worse” (111). Billy is unable to express his innocence through words, he is trapped in his silence. The only way to defend himself is through physical action. Billy has lost the power of language and reverts to the power of physical violence. He hits Claggart who falls dead to the deck. Billy’s silence prevents him from telling the truth, and this silence leads to Billy killing Claggart, and eventually to Billy’s own death. The suspense due to character differences is transformed into a tension between the difference in physical power and power of military rank, a tension between physical power and power invested in Claggart by the discourse on a war ship, a tension where Billy punches through the non-physical barrier of rank.

Upon the death of Claggart, Captain Vere exclaims: “Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” (146). The Captain knows that Claggart’s accusation is false. He also has knowledge of both Claggart’s and Billy’s dispositions, Claggart is evil and Billy is as good as an angel. Vere’s character is, however, determined by “his position in society” (Johnson 100), a position at the top of the hierarchy on board the ship. Captain Vere, based on the context of the situation, has decided that Billy will hang as a punishment for killing Claggart (Johnson 103). Foucault, when discussing military rank, states that “[d]iscipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places” (*Discipline* 181). Captain Vere has been subject to this play throughout his military training, and this must be seen as a vital part of the context Johnson alludes to. The Captain calls for an immediate court martial, where three other officers shall sentence Billy. Captain Vere knows that the three officers’ intelligence “was mostly confined to the matter of active seamanship” (149), and he elegantly guides them to a sentence which can be nothing else than Billy’s death through hanging. Captain Vere uses the power vested in him by his position and through the power of military discourse to get a death sentence for “the angel”.

The main reason stated for a death sentence is Captain Vere’s assertion that order must prevail, and anything else than a hanging could upset the other sailors which might result in a real rebellion. The Captain explicitly warns the three officers that they must not consider any other circumstances than Billy’s deadly punch. Captain Vere changes from an empathic person who has a unique ability to judge a person’s character, to a judge who rigorously follows protocol. The source of power
in Vere’s actions changes from that of innate knowledge of right and wrong to the knowledge of the law and what is expected. This is the context where his decision is made, and it is this judgement which is at the heart of the story, a judgement based on the “relation between” (Johnson 106) individuals. The three officers are reluctant to condemn Billy. They know Billy’s character, they also know of Claggart’s false accusation, and try to discuss a more understanding approach where these circumstances would be considered. They even question Captain Vere’s sanity, but being of lower rank, they cannot but condemn Billy. The discourse of hierarchical power relations is firmly rooted, specifically within the ranks of the navy, and even though both sanity and justice are questioned by those of lower rank, the protests are meager. The discourse of hierarchy is sustained by the codified discourse of law. These discourses work in fundamentally different ways, but here support the same outcome. The discourse of military rank differentiates by separating those of lower rank from those of higher, whereas the discourse of law, in a non-differentiating way, “bring[s] into play the binary opposition of the permitted and the forbidden” (Foucault, Discipline 183). Captain Vere’s decision is made on the basis of these discourses, but other power relations are also at play.

In the novel, Captain Vere manifests the prevailing norms, more specifically the laws on board a warship. He was a “sailor of distinction” (116), and he “always acquitt[ed] himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerat[ed] an infraction of discipline” (116). In short, his leadership was efficient in training docile bodies amongst his crew. Furthermore, he was of an aristocratic family, well-read, honest and direct. This description hints at the possibility that Captain Vere himself was harder to break into a docile body, his character strengths could therefore resist such attempts. There is also speculation of another side of Captain Vere at the time of his all too early death:

The spirit that ’spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fulness of fame. (168)

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5 Philip Loosemore argues that both Billy’s punch and Captain Vere’s “preservation of the established political order” (101) bring to light the tension between “necessity and morality, or better, between necessity and natural law” (101) where Billy represents “natural law” and Captain Vere “necessity”. Both types of forces are justified, and, claims Loosemore, the text does not provide answers to where our sympathies should lie.
Ambition is described as “the most secret of all passions”, which would imply an ambition at the expense of others, an ambition where one’s own gain and nothing else is the objective. It is not clear if Captain Vere indulged in this secret passion, but if he did, and indeed if this passion even included to attain “the fullness of fame”, he would have been particular in not leaving any visible loose ends to be seen by his superiors. One such loose end would have been an un-hung Billy, seemingly a murderer that Vere would have presented to his superiors to decide upon. Such indecisiveness would have hampered his possibilities for advancement. Better then to show resoluteness and take charge of the situation, which makes “it possible to attain higher ranks and places” (Foucault, *Discipline* 181). The decision to hang Billy is therefore not only in line with prevailing norms, but it could also aid any future career ambitions.

When the result of the trial is announced to the other sailors, no one speaks up even though everyone knows of Billy’s good-hearted nature and that hanging him cannot be right. Although, Captain Vere understands “the essential right and wrong involved in the matter … he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis” (148). The “primitive basis” is the immanent feeling of “right and wrong”, a feeling shared by the three officers and the rest of the crew, a feeling resonating with their belief of what consists “the truth”. A judgement based on the belief of truth was not a judgment Captain Vere saw to be within his authority regardless of his feelings or beliefs. He is drilled as a sailor and thereby drilled to follow orders, to adhere to the discourses of rank and law. Therefore, no one is to blame, as expressed by Captain Vere: “For that [martial] law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible” (153). It is convenient not to have to take responsibility for one’s actions, it is even more convenient if no one else but “the system” is to blame either. Foucault describes this juridical system as “the great external apparatus … [a] new mechanism[-] of normalizing judgement” (*Discipline* 183). By creating a juridical system, external to any individual, judgement based on this system has an effect of de-humanizing the result. Hence, no one is responsible and the feeling of right and wrong need not be part of the formal process, it can be put aside as a “primitive” matter. Captain Vere cannot help to seek justification for his judgement, a judgement where he seemed decisive, but where other alternatives were actively supressed.

Billy’s last words are: “God bless Captain Vere” (163). Billy is much a product of the expected routines and laws on board a war ship, and his last words
could be a way to express an understanding of the necessities of the formal process guided by Captain Vere. Billy’s words could also be a wish for God to actually forgive Captain Vere for his wrongdoings. Captain Vere’s actions and words demonstrate that in his discourse it is not for man to decide whether morality is in tune with the martial laws. He fears that this would create chaos in a world where structure is the ultimate sign of civilisation, and even Billy may not see alternatives. Any deviations from the code of the law would be to “determine matter[s] on [a] primitive basis” (148), a form of judgement that does not belong in the discourse on board a warship. As a result, Captain Vere’s decision is the same as Captain Delano’s, which is conformity with norms and laws.

The Captains and the lawyer
There is however one great difference between the captains. To Captain Delano there is no reflection on right or wrong, there are no shades of grey, there is only conformity with norms. He does what is expected, not out of self-preservation, but because there are no alternatives. Captain Vere, however, knows that there is right and wrong, and that there are shades of grey, but he still chooses to see the world only in black and white. He has knowledge, but selects not to act accordingly. Instead, he does the same thing as Captain Delano, he follows protocol. Captain Vere found it important to have a quick resolution to the affair, and he argues that he acted in the interest of the whole ship to avoid any further trouble, and ultimately in the interest of the nation and the King. These could be his real motives, but whether they are or not, he made a conscious choice.

The lawyer, in his dealings with Bartleby, has a revelation, then gives in to peer pressure and the norms of society. Finally, when Bartleby is imprisoned, the lawyer tries to help him and thereby simultaneously ease his own conscience. He uses a middle-ground when compared to the two captains, but even he cannot save Bartleby from death. In all three fictions, the rigid, hierarchical power relations of civilised society are at the core of the plots. These power relations, whether codified in a law or un-codified as norms of society, have the effect of oppressing the underprivileged and the eccentric. I have discussed several different ways that the works of fiction manage these structures and norms of society. The end result is death for the vulnerable party, a result caused by the oppressive forces. Melville shows the perils of the oppressive structures, but there are also many other power relations at play which gives an enigmatic feel to the reading of the fictions.
the structures and power relations defining our society give ample opportunity to
explore human nature, but at the same time Melville does not provide packaged
answers with solutions.

Modes of resistance
What creates the tension in Melville’s three literary works is resistance to these
dramatized power relations. This resistance takes different shapes in the narratives,
from Bartleby’s passivity to Babo’s bloody rebellion. To Foucault, resistance is
intimately related to power: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or
rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to
power” (Sexuality 95). Resistance is in fact a product of power, and more than that,
without resistance there would be no power relations. Resistance is a force that can
shape and alter existing power relations, and at the same time power relations are the
source for resistance. Power in turn “attempts to resolve the problem of the
resistance” (Hoffman 29), and power strives to make the individual more obedient.
Resistance does not have one single source or form. Foucault points out that each
occurrence is a special case (Sexuality 96). He continues that, just as power relations
form a dense web, so does resistance. It is the battle of the two opposing forces that
makes the ultimate form of resistance, a rebellion, possible.

Benito Cereno
Benito Cereno revolves around the plot where Babo orchestrates a rebellion on board
the San Dominick. Babo, “a small negro of Senegal” (90), “whose brain, not body, …
scheme[s] and [leads] the revolt” (102). He is powerful despite his slight frame, a
power based on his leadership skills and knowledge. In the discourse of the slaves,
these qualities are obvious to the other slaves, and there is no doubt who should be
their leader. Even Delano can perceive some of the qualities, but his deduction is
instead that Babo is a slave worth owning, he even queries Babo’s price. Babo not
only takes advantage of the slaves’ superior muscle power, but, more importantly, he
has the ability to break free from the mental oppressive power structures, the
structures that define the normal state of affairs. After the capture of the slaves, Babo
utters not one more word: “His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will
not speak words” (102). His rebellion takes on a new form. Throughout the story we
only hear his voice as that of an actor of a faithful slave, we do not hear his own
voice, and now he literally becomes voiceless instead. He knows that he is powerless,
he is going to die, resistance would not help and his silence is his only alternative as a form of resistance to discourses of law. Amongst his peers, he was valued for his intelligence, but, as a slave, in the discourses of law and “white” society, his value is linked to his body, his voice has no value.

The rebellion and its ending must be seen in the light of Don Benito’s revelation and the power relations based on a superior position with regards to “muscle power”. When Don Benito, by playing the master and at the same time being oppressed by the present master who used to be a slave, explains how a continuation of the slave trade brings death, he expresses an understanding of the rebellion. At the same time, in effect, he puts an end to the rebellion by, on Delano’s departure, throwing himself off the ship and thereby exposing the mutiny. He rebels against the rebels. Although Don Benito has developed an understanding of the rebellion, his own life is still dear to him and he puts up a fight, he exercises resistance. A rebellion where the rebels attempt to overthrow an established authority by violence will inevitably lead to destruction, a wafting to the tomb for many of those involved. This reveals a dilemma where Don Benito has an understanding of the unjust tyrannical structures of slavery, but at the same time his own life, and the lives of the other whites, are dear to him. He opts to save his own life, a decision which will haunt him for the rest of his life. The rebellion was made possible in the first place both by Babo’s ability to “think outside the box” where he was psychologically trapped, and by the slaves’ advantage in muscle power. The rebellion was ended by a technological advantage of Delano’s crew, another type of muscle power. They had guns and could easily overpower the rebels. The rebellion on the San Dominick led to the death of many of the oppressed as well as many of the oppressors. Even so, when the opportunity came, both Babo and Don Benito took the chance to resist against the oppressing powers of tyranny despite the dangers involved. The forces of resistance are strong and shape the forces of power relations, and in the case of a rebellion these opposing forces are crystalized.

Bartleby

Bartleby’s rebellion starts on the third day of his employment, when the lawyer asks him to examine and verify the accuracy of a document. When asked to help do a task seen as a part of his job, Bartleby replies “in a singularly mild, firm voice… ‘I would prefer not to’” (10). This is the full scope of Bartleby’s rebellion, he prefers not to. The norm that he resists to be incorporated in is that of the capitalistic finance
quarters, and to prefer not to do anything is to resist that web of power relations that this whole society is built upon. During his first days of employment, Bartleby demonstrates that he has the capacity to perform well, but he subsequently prefers not to do so. He never gives an explanation to his standpoint, and the lawyer never understands it either. Neither does Bartleby deny having knowledge of his situation, he actually indicates being in the know. He says: “Do you not see the reason for yourself” (21), “I know you” (32), and “I know where I am” (32). The lawyer offers explanations where neither he himself nor the system are to blame, e.g. he discusses Bartleby’s eyesight at length. For his other two employees, who perform only 50% of the time, he similarly has found reasons connected to the employee for their poor performance. The lawyer is satisfied with these explanations, they justify a continued easy life. Bartleby never refuses to do anything, he always prefers not to. The lawyer tries to force the issue and requests: “Why do you refuse?”. Bartleby replies: “I would prefer not to.” (12 original italics). Maurice Blanchot argues convincingly how a deliberate refusal “expresses a decision … and comes no closer to passivity than this act” (17). The subtle difference between “refuse” and “prefer not to” is the difference between a deliberate act and “an abstention which has never had to be decided upon” (Blanchot 17). Bartleby’s actions leave no room for any other interpretation than his actually not doing what is requested, but his language leaves room for ambiguity. Maybe there is something he would actually prefer to do that the lawyer has failed to discover and the lawyer in desperation suggests highly unlikely jobs such as bartender or travel companion, but with no success. Bartleby prefers not to do anything, but at the same time he is “not particular” (30). Bartleby resists to participate in the way of life that is expected on Wall Street, and indeed in any other part of Western society. Bartleby spends his days looking at a wall three feet outside the window. Later, in prison, he similarly spends his days looking at a wall. He is trapped and cannot break free, but from what, he never explains. He is part of the power relations in the office, as his passivity leads to friction with these relations, but at the same time he is outside the power game. If he had ‘refused to do’ instead of ‘preferred not to do’, he would not have been outside, he would clearly have been inside and part of the struggle.6 It is this ‘being outside’ that is his real resistance, but to exercise resistance you need to

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6 Maurice Blanchot describes Bartleby’s expression ”I would prefer not to” as an expression where “Bartleby gives up … ever saying anything … This is abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, a relinquishment of identity … [he has] fallen out of being” (17).
be inside. Bartleby attempts to resist “in a position [exterior] to power” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 95), even though Foucault proposes that this exteriority cannot exist. A solution to this dichotomy is not proposed, but at the same time this is what makes Bartleby’s resistance genuinely intriguing.

**Billy Budd**

*Billy Budd* takes place on a warship during times of war and when the law of the Mutiny Act is enforced due to earlier mutinies on other warships. As such, rebellion is an important background to Melville’s novel. At the heart of the plot is Billy’s strike that kills Claggart. In this stroke, he resists the power that accuses him of mutiny. No other obvious acts of resistance can be attributed to Billy, but there is nevertheless a charged power relation between him and Claggart prior to the confrontation. As there is such a relation, there is also a resistance according to Foucault. Billy is reported to try and stay out of trouble, he is “heedful in all things” (123). Billy can only take what he sees at face value, and hence he cannot feel or understand Claggart’s aversion. After Claggart’s death, Captain Vere takes control of, and is in control of, the power relations. There is not much resistance, the discussed hierarchical military regime shreds this resistance to mere nothingness. Foucault expresses this in terms of disciplinary power making the body more obedient and at the same time more useful, “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.” (*Discipline* 138). Obedience results in weaker forces for power relations, and hence weaker forces for resistance. The Foucauldian argument can explain the easy process of persuasion for Captain Vere and the obedience by the crew of the ship once Billy’s hanging was announced. The sailors become what Foucault calls ‘docile’ bodies.

The last words Captain Vere murmurs are: “Billy Budd, Billy Budd” (168). It is said that these words “were not the accents of remorse would seem clear from what the attendant said” (168). The Captain’s last words signify that he had not come to terms with the moral dilemma involved in the death sentencing. The narrator, however, although filtered through the attendant, says that these words were *not* those of remorse, which is in contradiction to what seems to have have been a main concern for Captain Vere. The utterance of Billy’s name would imply that he has suffered from the moral dilemma, but the text says otherwise. We never learn what the attendant said, and hence cannot judge the correctness of the narration. By hanging Billy, the Captain has likely been left brooding over the issue. Captain Vere feared mutiny, and Billy was sacrificed for the “common good”. It would not be surprising if
the memory of this act left the Captain feeling remorseful and even haunted. If this was the case, he shows signs that he may not be the totally docile body that he has trained his crew to be, “bodies that [are] both efficient in performance and obedient to authority” (May 76). Even so, it is important that Captain Vere and his officers continue along this path in the sentencing of Billy, otherwise the crew may “think that [they] flinch, that [they] are afraid of them” (155). This is the explanation given by Vere himself, and, following the discussion of docile bodies, this is a logical explanation in the naval world. Captain Vere himself, however, shows remorse on his deathbed indicating that he is not a docile body. At the same time he allows his actions to be those of the docile body, his decision is that of obedience but he is not unaffected: “the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had affected the condemnation” (157). By condemning Billy, the captain resists the possibility of leniency and as a result of this he suffers and feels remorse. His condemnation is a continuation of the training of his crew. He shows obedience to the forces of power in his discourse as a captain. This is also accentuated by his aristocratic upbringing which underlines the importance of honour and duty. Captain Vere is a docile body, a servant of the military machine. At the same time, he shows resistance to the very same regime that he supports in his actions, hence, he is not a completely trained docile body. This complex battle is what makes Captain Vere the character where resistance is given a face. The tension created by this resistance permeates the mind of the reader and Vere’s internal conflict is more felt than understood.

Silence as a form of resistance

Don Benito’s, and Babo’s, and Bartleby’s communication is mostly through silence, either as a silence where nothing is said or as silence of resignation where what should be said cannot be said. I have discussed how Don Benito’s voice is more like an act in a play, silence would have been a more truthful method of communication as he does not voice his own words. Babo stops talking altogether after his capture, and prior to that his voice is also that of an actor. Likewise, Don Benito’s voice follows the same pattern as discussed by Barnett: “[they] are assimilated to one linguistic standard, first in deceptive speaking and then in lack of speech” (61). The record of the juridical system shows how the version of the white society claims to be the “truth”, and hence any words uttered by Babo would not have been worthwhile. It would not have changed the record of the presented truth. Barnett discusses truth and silence in *Benito Cereno*: “Since neither Cereno nor Babo speaks at the end, the
authorical assertion of truthful revelation is no more than a perfunctory gesture of closure, akin to Delano’s offering of platitudes to assuage Cereno’s anguish” (62). The discourse of the juridical system reasserts its own authority and can, being in the dominant power position, determine the “truth”, a truth valid within its own system and also forced as a judgement on other discourses. Babo’s and Don Benito’s silences reflect this state of affairs, and the courtroom’s story is merely a way for society to get a closure, in the same way as Delano’s chitchat is a way for him to part on friendly terms with Don Benito. This is supported by Goldberg whose analysis says that the text could be understood to “represent justice’s perversion as an archive of silence, empty of the content it is expected to hold” (7) and that Babo’s “muteness is his testimony” (14). Foucault states that “we must try to determine the different ways of not saying [what one does not say]” (Sexuality 27). In Babo’s case, he was not prevented from speaking. Foucault further discusses subjects which are unspeakable (Sexuality 27). Neither was this the case as proven by Don Benito’s testimony, the subject of slavery was clearly not unspeakable as it was part of the common discourse. Still, Babo does not engage in discussions with the dominant forces, he chooses silence as his form of communication, a communication where he distances himself from the powers. Barnett explains that “it would be futile for him to plead the injustice of slavery to the tribunal which judges him without allowing him to testify” (62). Babo’s muteness is an active way of communication where he states that he will not participate.7 By his silence, Babo rejects the discourse of law and thereby the power structures that judge him.

Don Benito’s silent withdrawal to a monastery is also a silent communication. I have argued that by being exposed to the oppressive structures, he has gained an understanding, a revelation, which haunts him. At the tribunal however, we learn nothing of his revelation. He does not speak up. In transcripts of Foucault’s 1983 lectures at the University of California he reflects on telling the truth:

the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self- interest and moral apathy (2001 6)

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7 Kevin Goddard agrees that for Babo “silence is the only appropriate response to an oppressive system” (121).
Foucault sees this type of silence as a way to withhold the truth. He equates silence with falsehood which is in contrast to the arguments in this analysis. This is however not the type of silence we find in Melville’s texts. We instead need to study silence from a discourse perspective, silence as statement in itself:

Silence itself — the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers — is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault, Sexuality 27)

We must recognize that silence is a form of communication rather than just an absence of words. One could argue that Don Benito chooses silence instead of frankness and hence withholds the truth of the oppressive structures of slavery that he has come to know. His situation is however more complex, as Foucault would point out. His bad health has been used as a mitigating circumstance and could very well have been used again had he spoken out of his revelation, his statements would be attributed to poor health and not taken seriously. Foucault specifically points out discretion and type of authorized discourse as reasons for marked silence, both very valid points for Don Benito’s situation. All these opposing forces leave Don Benito numb. The earlier powers invested in his position as a captain and of good Spanish ancestry have shifted, and he finds himself in a position where he is haunted by this shift of power.

Bartleby speaks only as a reply to a question, and quite often not even then. Bartleby is trapped, by real and imaginary walls and by silence. He does not feel the necessity to communicate why, he knows where he is. At the same time, he leaves us not knowing his reasons. I have argued that his silence is the means of communication which gives the best representation of the truth, even if it is left unsaid. Similarly, Barnett states that “in [Bartleby’s] linguistic context responsible or truthful speech can have no place” (65) and that truth is often unspoken in the Piazza Tales (62). Bartleby has his own discourse of silence in the office, a discourse one could argue he is not “authorized” (Foucault, Sexuality 27) to bring with him to Wall Street. He
further shows no “discretion” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 27) to what is required. When Foucault states that “[s]ilence … [is] an element that functions alongside the things said” (*Sexuality* 27), it is difficult to categorise Bartleby’s silence alongside “the things said”. He is an enigmatic “creature” (27) and his discourse is not “alongside the things said” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 27). Barnett convincingly argues that *Bartleby* does not only not provide answers, but that “even the questions are elusive” (63).

At the defining moment of Billy Budd’s hanging, the word silence is used no less than three times:

> The *silence* at the moment of execution and for a moment or two continuing thereafter, a *silence* but emphasized by the regular wash of the sea against the hull or the flutter of a sail caused by the helmsman’s eyes being tempted astray, this emphasized *silence* was gradually disturbed by a sound not easily to be verbally rendered. (165 emphasis added)

During his stutter when he can voice no words, Billy punches Claggart to death. When given the opportunity to defend himself at the trial he says: “I have said all, sir” (152). Billy chooses not to speak. Goddard argues that “Billy's instinct for silence and trust is manipulated by the authority” (151). This silence follows Billy at the scene of his hanging, an “emphasized” silence. This silence is reinforced by the stillness of Billy’s body at his death, a stillness and silence haunts the sailors. In a discussion, the purser requests of the surgeon: “You admit, then, that the absence of spasmodic movement was phenomenal.” (164). Billy’s death is not only silent, but also void of movement, a serene moment. Following this serene moment, an “inarticulate” (165) sound arose, that “indicate[d] … [a] feeling such as mobs ashore are liable to” (165). This expression of disinclination with the hanging is abruptly halted by “a strategic command … that … came … unexpected[ly]” (165). The passivity of silence and immobility of Billy’s body evokes unrest, an unrest that is put down by contrasting activity. This contrast in power relations between the forces that surface through the seemingly unjust hanging, communicated by silence, and activity controlled by the structures of military hierarchy, mirrors the power relations between Bartleby and the norms of Wall Street, and also that between the unjust structures of slavery and the discourse expressed by the juridical system. Silence is a fundamental mode of resistance in the efforts to shift the positions of power.
Outcome of the conflict between power and resistance

Resistance always exists as a response to power relations (Foucault, *Sexuality* 95). These power relations can however “always be altered” (Lynch 24) through resistance. Both power and resistance are likened to a “dense web” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 96) of multiple dimensions where interaction is a constant battle. Disciplinary power strives to make the body “more obedient as it becomes more useful” (Foucault, *Discipline* 138) and results in what Foucault names “practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). The resistance at play in Melville’s three works of fiction is a resistance against the docility of the body and mind. Babo is useful to his owner as a slave because of his body. His revolt is a revolt to gain control of his own body. As discussed, he does so by using his intelligence and discursive power to lead the rebellion. Don Benito’s resistance, when he unveils the revolt of the slaves by throwing himself overboard and escaping, is also an attempt to save himself. Both manage to break out of the docility forced upon their bodies, but their circumstances after the capture of the slaves differ. Both are silenced, but their reasons for silence are different. Both end up dead, but for different reasons. Bartleby’s passive resistance can ironically be seen as evidence against the docility of his body in his menial existence. Bartleby moves from one location to the next, from the rumoured Dead Letter Office to the office on Wall Street and then to the Tombs, as the prison is called, each vista void of meaning to Bartleby. In the end, there is no reason to stay alive, awaiting another move to yet another meaningless location. The pointless existence in modern society’s punishment apparatus marks the end of Bartleby’s life. Billy Budd does not display much active resistance beyond the fatal punch. The resistance discussed in this story has been in Captain Vere’s deliberations for the correct punishment. His actions were without hesitation, but his lingering remorse reveals his resistance to the decision he judged was required. Both Billy and Captain Vere end up dead. Billy displayed only a moment of resistance, and Captain Vere’s resistance is subtle. This is in contrast to Babo and Bartleby where resistance is the main ingredient in their characterisation.

The lawyer and Captain Delano survive their ordeals. Captain Delano is portrayed as “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature” (35). His good-hearted view of coloured people is described as: “Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs”. (71) Delano’s characteristics are those of the benevolent father, and in the case of
“negroes” he is kind in the same way as one is naturally kind to beloved pets. Although Delano feels that something is amiss on board the San Dominick, his benign nature prevents him from understanding the play that unfolds before his eyes. Even though he often suspects that things are not what they seem, any sign of normality extinguishes these suspicions. This is described by Barnett as: “Time and again familiar labels reassuringly transform his unsettling observations and nebulous anxieties into stereotypes” (61). When Babo shaves Don Benito, Delano’s “weakness for negroes returned” (71). Delano’s voice is the voice of benign conformity with the norms of society, he is a docile body. In the same way that society’s norms seem to be unchanged because of the mutiny, so does the nature of Delano seem to be. When Delano finds out that the San Dominick has been subjected to mutiny, he orders the assault on the rebels. This action is far from benign for the fate of the coloured rebels, instead the action conforms to what is expected by the norms of society. Delano shows no remorse, or even reflection, in crushing the rebellion and bringing those guilty in front of the “justice” system. He is now able to see the rebellion without “the mask” (85), but nothing seems changed in his view of the nature of reality. He wears a new mask, that of “justice”. He says: “the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it.” (101). Delano remains blind to the revelation experienced by Don Benito, he has only unmasked one rebellion. In the same manner as benign Delano, who has not seemingly changed his view on the norms of society, society itself, represented by the juridical system, has not reflected on the possibility for change. The trial can as such be seen as a continuation of the disposition of Captain Delano, a disposition not hesitating to punish when violations to conformity are discovered, a disposition disciplined and obedient, shaped by the forces of power. Nevertheless, the captain continues his conversations with Don Benito, he keeps brooding, he is haunted by his experiences.

The lawyer acts in a similar way as Captain Delano, with regards to expectations from society, that is, he opts for the road of least trouble. Pahl describes this similarity in terms of Delano and the lawyer “imposing on Don Benito and Bartleby respectively] … a set of values which allows [them] to make perfect sense” (175) of the difficulties they meet. The lawyer and Delano, who are caught in the “dense web” of Foucauldian power relations and offer no or minimal resistance, can continue their lives unharmed by the struggles they have witnessed, and those who resist the “dense web” of power end up dead. Billy, who does not voluntarily resist
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and explicitly tries not to resist, ends up dead as well. Melville does not serve easily digestible answers to justify resistance. Those who do not resist survive, and, seemingly, continue their lives in contentment, but are however not resistant to the changes in power relations.

What the justification and outcome of resistance in the three fictions are cannot be answered simply. This is of course unsurprising. If that were the case, these texts would not be analysed a century and a half after they were written. The texts have an embedded irony where we as readers follow much of the story through the eyes of a spokesperson that could be any one of us. This spokesperson represents what the resisting forces try to modify, even if it is not always clear what it is that is under modification. The lawyer and Delano represent the norms of society, they are the spokespersons of the masses. Captain Vere is, through his actions, the spokesperson for the strict hierarchical military power relations. My discussion reveals how each of these characters is haunted by their experiences. Different forms of resistance have dented conventional order. Hence, conventional order cannot be seen as either unchangeable or stable. This change, in turn, indicates a shift in power relations. We can even discuss in terms of at least a partial reversal of power position. The spokespersons of conventional order are left haunted, in pain, suffering, but the oppressed party suffers no more. The seemingly futile resistance has managed to change the power structures, rigid power structures that in a final analysis are more fragile than they seem at first.

Conclusions
I have discussed how society’s pillars of power such as, property, law, capitalism, and military hierarchy are not sufficient for an understanding of Melville’s texts. These power structures are accompanied by a wide variety of other power relations that make up a Foucauldian web of power. For each power relation, a force of resistance is present, a force that impacts the power relation in question. The conflict between these opposing forces leads to change. In Melville’s three B’s, this change is sometimes dramatic, as with the deaths of Babo and Don Benito, and sometimes more subtle as in the case of Delano’s feeling of being haunted which compels him to ruminate on his experiences. It may seem that conventional order is re-established, and nothing is gained from resistance. Those who resist end up dead, and those least
affected try to live their lives in the harmony of past times. However, this harmony has been changed, as power has changed positions.

I have argued that the spokespersons of the dominant power discourse are affected by this re-positioning of power, a re-positioning that to some extent has reversed the power positions. Resistance, that in a first reading may seem futile, has affected the power relations and the spokespersons struggle in vain to re-establish conventional order. The tension between the opposing forces of power and resistance is always there, a part of the nature of our reality, and an insurance that power never fossilizes in contrasting positions. Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* asserts: “[T]here is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.” (Melville 58). The contrast between opposing forces is indeed an integral part our existence and ensures that works of fiction such as Melville’s three B’s will continue to be written, read, and analysed, works of fiction where the reader is left with a lingering unease, much as our two captains and the lawyer.
Works Cited


