

## Transformations and Convergences: The Evil Eye in Melville's Fiction

Although Melville's fascination with the supernatural has been noted by numerous biographers and critics, little attention has been paid to one of the most pervasive and significant supernatural traditions in his fiction: the cluster of beliefs, rituals, and events known collectively as the evil eye. Kevin Hayes, for example, makes no mention of the evil eye in *Melville's Folk Roots* (1999), and the one study that does address the subject—Joseph Adamson's *Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye* (1997)—eschews folkloristic analysis altogether in favor of a psychoanalytic interpretation grounded in the work of shame theorists such as Heinz Kohut, Silvan Tomkins, and Leon Wurmser. By contrast, I argue in this essay that while psychoanalytic and folkloristic approaches are by no means mutually exclusive, the evil eye is first and foremost a folkloric phenomenon and its role in Melville's fiction warrants far more attention than it has yet received.

Based on the assumption that certain people and animals “possess eyes whose glance has the power to injure or even kill” (Jones 1951: 11), the evil eye—also known as “eye bite,” “angry eye,” overlooking,” “fascination,” “invidia,” and other names—is, in the words of folklorist Alan Dundes, “not some old fashioned superstitious belief of interest solely to antiquarians” (Dundes 1992: viii-ix) but a multi-faceted “folk belief complex” of “great antiquity” and vast geographical distribution (Dundes 1992: vii). References to it appear in ancient “Assyrian and Akadian documents” as well as “in the Bible, . . . in the Apocrypha, in the Talmudic writings, . . . in the Koran,” and a host of other religious writings from “Old Testament times” (Hand 1980: 240). Plato mentions it, as do Aristotle, Plinny, Plutarch, Ovid, Herodotus, and other classical authorities. Bacon devotes a chapter to the subject in his *Essays and Counsels Civil and Moral*. Shakespeare alludes to it in the *Merchant of Venice*. Lewis's Monk, Beckford's Vathek, Mary Shelley's Dimitri of the Evil Eye, and numerous other Gothic villains possess the power, as do the supernatural enchantresses of “Christabel,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and other poems of the English Romantics. And numerous other examples can be found in nineteenth century American fiction, including Edgar Allan Poe's “The ‘Tell-Tale’ Heart” and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Melville's familiarity with these works and authors has been thoroughly documented in such standard references as Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible*, Merton Sealts's *Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned and Borrowed*, and Mary Bercaw's *Melville's Sources*. Thus, it seems logical to assume that at least some of the beliefs and practices associated with the evil eye he learned indirectly through printed sources, but his fictional depictions of the psycho-social dynamics of the belief complex correspond so closely to the realities of the folk event documented by ethnographers that Melville was almost certainly guided as well by insights gleaned from direct participation in folk tradition.

1 This intermingling of oral and written sources is especially apparent in *Mardi*,  
 2 the third of Melville's novels and the first to mention the evil eye. Here, the person  
 3 endowed with this attribute is the enigmatic Hautia, an otherworldly being who has  
 4 as much in common with Coleridge's Geraldine or Keat's Lamia as with the  
 5 'fascinator' or 'overlooker' of folk tradition.

6 First introduced in Ch. 61 just after the narrator has assumed the name of the  
 7 Demi-God Taji to enhance his stature among the Mardian islanders, Hautia is,  
 8 from the outset, "a mysterious figure" with a "solitary eye" (Melville 1970: 186)  
 9 which produces an effect on Taji and his companion Yillah that is consistent with  
 10 both folkloric and literary perceptions of the individual possessed of the evil eye:

11  
 12 Now it [the eye of the stranger] was fixed upon Yillah with a sinister glance,  
 13 and now upon me, but with a different expression. However great the crowd,  
 14 however tumultuous, that fathomless eye gazed on; till at last it seemed no  
 15 eye, but ever a spirit, forever prying into my soul (Melville 1970: 186).

16  
 17 Later, when Taji and his companions approach the Isle of Flozella in search of  
 18 Yillah, who has mysteriously vanished from the island of Odo, they encounter  
 19 Queen Hautia, whose kinship with the mysterious stranger becomes immediately  
 20 apparent. Her eye, Taji observes, is "fathomless"--a "mysterious, evil-boding  
 21 gaze" (Melville 1970: 646) to which he soon gives a name: "Is not that, the evil eye  
 22 that long ago did haunt me" (Melville 1970: 640)? Because Hautia is described  
 23 variously as a "phantom," an "enchantress," and a "syren," Stith Thompson's Motif  
 24 A 128.2.1--"God with the Evil Eye"--seems an especially apt descriptor, as does  
 25 Motif D 2072.1, "Magic Paralysis" (Thompson 1966), which is applicable both to  
 26 Hautia's maidens, whom the historian Mohi believes to be "all Yillahs, held  
 27 captive, unknown to themselves" (648), and to Taji, who believes himself to be  
 28 under a "spell" so powerful that Hautia . . . through her fixed eyes, slowly drank up  
 29 my soul" (Melville 1970: 652).

30 By evoking these popular associations of the supernatural (Di Stasi 1971: 23),  
 31 Melville draws attention not only to Hautia's allegorical role as carnal goddess  
 32 tempting the hero to abandon his spiritual quest, symbolized by Yillah, but also to  
 33 the ambiguities inherent in the quest itself—a quest for truth compromised from  
 34 the outset by murder and deceit.

35 In *Redburn*, Melville's next novel, the scene shifts from the enchanted isles  
 36 and grottoes of *Mardi* to the shipboard world of the *Highlander*, where the  
 37 fascinator is not a lamia or some other supernatural being but an ordinary sailor by  
 38 the name of Jackson, and his victims are not phantom maidens or demigods but his  
 39 own shipmates.

40 These changes in no way diminish, however, the impact of the evil eye on the  
 41 lives of the characters or the consciousness of readers conversant with the  
 42 particulars of the belief complex. In fact, they bring the fictional situation much  
 43 closer to the folk event than was possible in the previous book.

44 Especially striking are the similarities between the overlooker of folk tradition  
 45 and the evil-eyed Jackson. According to ophthalmologist Edward Gifford, "In

1 general any condition of the eyes which appears to be abnormal or unusual may  
 2 awaken the fear of the fascinator" (Gifford 1958: 21)—and particularly suspect are  
 3 those with "prominent, brilliant, or glittering eyes" (Gifford 1958: 22) or "anyone  
 4 whose eyes differ in color from those of his neighbors" (Gifford 1958: 22). Also  
 5 susceptible to evil eye accusaion are those who are cross-eyed (Meerloo 1971: 33)  
 6 or "blind in one eye" (Brav 1908: 49), and those whose eyebrows meet, "forming  
 7 two prominent semicircular arcs above the eyes, which enlarge their concentric  
 8 contours" (Coss 1974: 22).

9 Jackson—to whom Redburn explicitly attributes the evil eye when he says, "I  
 10 could not avoid Jackson's evil eye, nor escape his bitter enmity" (Melville 1969:  
 11 )—fits the profile of the overlooker in virtually every detail. "Did you ever see a  
 12 man," Redburn asks, "with his hair shaved off, and just recovered from the yellow  
 13 fever? Well, just such a looking man was this sailor" (Melville 1969: 56)—a man  
 14 whom Redburn later characterizes as "such a hideous looking mortal, that Satan  
 15 himself would have run from him" (Melville 1969: 57). Though Jackson has two  
 16 eyes, he "squinted with one eye, and did not look very straight out of the other"  
 17 (Melville 1969: 56)—peculiarities that take on more ominous associations in  
 18 Redburn's later comment that "One glance of his squinting eye, was as good as a  
 19 knock-down, for it was the most deep, subtle, infernal looking eye, that I ever saw  
 20 lodged in a human head" (Melville 1969: 57). This glance is not only intense and  
 21 piercing but suggestive of the paralyzing gaze of reputed animal and reptilian  
 22 fascinator: "I believe, that by good rights it must have belonged to a wolf, or  
 23 starved tiger; at any rate, I would defy any oculist, to turn out a glass eye, half so  
 24 cold, and snaky, and deadly" (Melville 1969: 57)

25 As these details suggest, the evil eye is a powerful agency and its possessor is  
 26 someone to be feared. "All the men were afraid of him, and durst not contradict  
 27 him, or cross his path in anything" (Melville 1969: 57), Redburn reports. "They all  
 28 stood in mortal fear of him; and cringed and fawned about him like so many  
 29 spaniels" (Melville 1969: 59). As for himself, Redburn invariably shuddered when  
 30 "I caught this man gazing at me, as I often did," with "his eyes fixed, and his teeth  
 31 set, like a man in the moody madness" (Melville 1969: 58).

32 Not content merely to record the effects of Jackson's gaze on himself and other  
 33 members of the crew, Redburn seeks answers to a more fundamental question:  
 34 what motivates Jackson to act as he does? For many participants in the folk belief  
 35 complex, the evil eye is synonymous with envy. In fact, Joost Meerloo calls the  
 36 evil eye "the gaze of envy" (Meerloo 1971: 31), reaffirming nineteenth century evil  
 37 eye scholar Frederic Elworthy's thesis that "*invidia*, envy, or evil eye" is "the  
 38 instigator of most deadly sins—the vice which is even now most frequently named  
 39 in connection with . . . 'hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness'" (Elworthy  
 40 1895, 1958: 7).

41 Redburn articulates much the same philosophy when attempting to explain  
 42 Jackson's antipathy for him:

43  
 44 I was young and handsome, at least my mother so thought me, and as soon as I  
 45 became a little used to the sea, and shook off my low spirits somewhat, I began to

1 have my old color in my cheeks, and, spite of misfortune, to appear well and hearty;  
 2 whereas *he* was being consumed by an incurable malady, that was eating up his  
 3 vitals, and was more fit for a hospital than a ship" (Melville 1969: 58).

4  
 5  
 6 The connection between envy and the evil eye also helps to explain why "the  
 7 weaker and weaker he grew, the more outrageous became his treatment of the  
 8 crew" (Melville 1969: 276).

9 More difficult to explain is the compassion Redburn feels for his  
 10 tormentor. "Though there were moments when I almost hated this Jackson,"  
 11 Redburn admits, "yet I have pitied no man as I have pitied him" (Melville 1969:  
 12 105). Why? Because "there seemed even more woe than wickedness about the  
 13 man; and his wickedness seemed to spring from his woe; and for all his  
 14 hideousness, there was that in his eye at times, that was ineffably pitiable and  
 15 touching" (Melville 1969: 105). If Jackson had indeed sold his soul to the Devil as  
 16 Redburn implies elsewhere, then there would be no reason for compassion or  
 17 empathy. But if he has what is known as the "involuntary" evil eye, he has no  
 18 control over the power or the damage it may cause the objects of his gaze; thus, in  
 19 the words of Howard Stein, "Compassion is due not only the one stricken by the  
 20 evil eye, but equally the unfortunate" who casts it (Stein 1976: 209)--a conclusion  
 21 supported also by Thomas Davidson, who terms the involuntary evil eye "a curse  
 22 to the unhappy possessor" (Davidson 1992: 145).

23 Though not mentioned in Melville's next book, *White Jacket*, the evil eye  
 24 reappears in his sixth novel *Moby Dick* in Father Mapple's retelling of the biblical  
 25 story of Jonah, where it takes on a very different form than in previous novels.  
 26 Jonah embarks, Mapple reminds his congregation, from "Joppa, the modern Jaffa. .  
 27 . on the most easterly coast of the Mediterranean" (Melville 1988: 43)—where the  
 28 evil eye belief complex is perhaps stronger than anywhere else in the world. And  
 29 the minister's description of Jonah's appearance and behavior, an imaginative  
 30 elaboration of the biblical text rather than a literal transcription, seems calculated  
 31 to arouse in his auditors exactly the kinds of suspicions that might be anticipated in  
 32 a folk cultural context. Jonah has what Mapple describes as a "guilty eye"--a  
 33 "disordered, self-condemning . . . look" (Melville 1988: 43) that sets him apart  
 34 from others and makes him an outcast even on a crowded wharf or ship. As he  
 35 proceeds, Mapple continues to alter the biblical text, eventually making explicit  
 36 the reason for Jonah's alienation: "all the sailors for the moment desist from  
 37 hoisting in the goods, to mark the stranger's evil eye" (Melville 1988: 43).

38 Although the Book of Jonah makes no mention of the evil eye, Mapple clearly  
 39 assumes that his auditors will understand its appropriateness to Jonah because  
 40 the focus of the sermon shifts immediately to the interaction between the  
 41 individual accused of having the evil eye and other members of the community.  
 42 Although Mapple says nothing to suggest that Jonah actually casts the evil eye on  
 43 someone else--as Hautia does to Taji or Jackson to Redburn--he is nonetheless  
 44 held responsible for the storm that threatens the life of everyone on board the ship.  
 45 According to Tobin Siebers, this is the common fate of the person reputed to have

1 the evil eye: to 'become isolated at the heart of the community' and to serve as a  
 2 "living victim who elicits and polarizes the desires of his neighbors" (Siebers  
 3 1983: 56).

4 Another link between Mapple's narrative and folk tradition is the sympathy  
 5 accorded the individual presumed to have the evil eye. Just as Redburn pities  
 6 Jackson, the sailors—though "appalled" by Jonah's confession of his disobedience  
 7 to God—"still are pitiful" (Melville 1988: 46), perhaps because in Father Mapple's  
 8 version of the story, they recognize that they, too, are "all sinners among men"  
 9 (Melville 1988: 42).

10 Ultimately, however, the most significant of Mapple's emendations to the  
 11 biblical text is the one he does not make. In the sermon, as in the biblical  
 12 narrative, Jonah is redeemed through repentance and obedience--presumably casting  
 13 aside his evil eye in the process. But in a social context, the individual accused of  
 14 overlooking is powerless to change; thus the evil eye becomes a lifelong curse--  
 15 regardless of the individual's moral character or religious convictions.

16 Thus, in the very act of eliciting from his auditors their "strong intuitions"  
 17 (Melville 1988: 43) of the evil eye belief complex that support his interpretation of  
 18 the scriptural text, Mapple invites potentially conflicting responses, just as Ishmael  
 19 does by reporting without comment the minister's words. The result is the same  
 20 kind of ambiguous relativism that underlies almost every utterance and event in the  
 21 novel--and undermines any attempt to discover ultimate truth whether it is  
 22 embodied in Mapple's allegory of sinful humanity reunited with God through  
 23 repentance or in the whiteness of the whale.

24 By the end of the decade, Melville had abandoned his pursuit of a literary  
 25 career, but his interest in the evil eye never waned, for he returned to it with an  
 26 even deeper understanding of its social, psychological, and metaphysical  
 27 dimensions in his final novel *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*. Composed  
 28 during the last four years of his life and published posthumously in 1924, *Billy*  
 29 *Budd* tells a story very similar to the one he had recounted more than forty years  
 30 before in *Redburn*. Once again, a young man, innocent in the ways of the world,  
 31 unknowingly incurs the enmity of another member of the ship's company--a man  
 32 with a mesmeric eye and an evil nature that defy rational explanation. But this  
 33 time, the setting is a British man of war on patrol in the Mediterranean at the  
 34 height of the war between England and France, not an American merchant vessel  
 35 plying the waters between New York and Liverpool on a routine peacetime  
 36 voyage. The possessor of the evil eye is a man with real power over the men  
 37 below his rank and the capacity to use it, rather than an ordinary seaman who does  
 38 nothing more than verbally abuse and threaten his peers. The victim of the  
 39 overlooker is even more innocent than the protagonist of the earlier novel but  
 40 without the intelligence to recognize and avoid the evil that confronts him. And  
 41 the outcome of the encounter between these two men has tragic consequences only  
 42 hinted at in the earlier work.

43 The last and most complex of Melville's evil-eyed characters is John Claggart,  
 44 the master-at-arms of the *HMS Bellipotent*. Though less repugnant physically than  
 45 Jackson, Claggart has the distinctive facial and ocular traits of the folk fascinator.

1 His “eye could cast a tutoring glance” (Melville 1962: 64). His “brow was of the  
 2 sort phrenologically assoicated with more than average intellect,” but his pallid  
 3 “complexion, singularly contrasting with red or deeply bronzed visages of the  
 4 sailors, seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and  
 5 blood” (Melville 1962: 64). The “glance” he directs at Billy from afar is described  
 6 as “an immitigable look, pinching and shrivelling the visage into the momentary  
 7 semblance of a wrinkled walnut” (Melville 1962: 88)—a look that intensifies  
 8 “upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter” (Melville 1962: 88) with the young  
 9 foretopman. At those moments, “a red light would flash forth from his eye like a  
 10 spark from an anvil in a dusky smithy”—a “quick, fierce light” that “darted from  
 11 orbs which in repose were of a color nearest approaching a deeper violet, the  
 12 softest of shades” (Melville 1962: 88).

13 Claggart’s physical characteristics alone would make him susceptible to evil  
 14 eye accusations in virtually any of the societies in which the folk belief complex  
 15 exists, but there are others of equal importance, notably the overt expressions of  
 16 admiration and praise for Billy that belie his true feelings of hate and envy.

17 Espcially significant in this regard is Claggart’s response to Billy when the  
 18 foretopman “chanced in a sudden lurch” of the ship “to spill the entire contents of  
 19 his soup pan upon the new-scrubbed deck” (Melville 1962: 72) just as the master-  
 20 at-arms was passing by: “‘Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as  
 21 handsome did it, too’” (Melville 1962: 72)! Here, Billy takes Claggart’s words at  
 22 face value, as he does earlier when told by his shipmates that the master-at-arms  
 23 calls him “‘the sweet and pleasant young fellow’” (Melville 1962: 71), but he does  
 24 not see the “involuntary smile, or rather grimace, that accompanied Claggart’s  
 25 equivocal words” (Melville 1962: 72) and cannot comprehend why the old Dasker  
 26 continues to insist that “‘*Jemmy Legs*’ (meaning the master-at-arms) ‘is down on  
 27 you’” (Melville 1962: 71).

28 Readers familiar with the evil eye complex would have no such difficulties,  
 29 however. Michael Spooner speaks to the issues raised in the fictional situation  
 30 from an anthropological perspective, noting that “any form of admiration is feared  
 31 as a potential vehicle for the evil eye” (Spooner 1976: 80)—a point reaffirmed by  
 32 Regina Dionisopoulos-Mass, who argues that “The first dynamic of power is that  
 33 of the evil eye. This is a power of the eye (an admiring look), the thought, or a  
 34 voiced compliment . . . the compliment is a threat, one expressing the envy of the  
 35 complimenter for the admired one’s good fortune. It is a threat covered with words  
 36 of flattery and praise” (Dionisopoulos-Mass 1976: 44- 45).

37 Although Billy has a “good nature, indicating no mental superiority tending to  
 38 excite an invidious feeling” (Melville 1962: 89), the moment he is impressed into  
 39 service on the *Bellipotent*, he unknowingly provokes such feelings in Claggart. At  
 40 first it appears that “what it was that had first moved him against Billy” was simply  
 41 the latter’s great “personal beauty” (Melville 1962: 77), but as we soon learn,  
 42 Claggart’s envy “was no vulgar form of the passion. Nor, as directed toward Billy  
 43 Budd, did it partake of that steak of apprehensive jealousy that marred Saul’s  
 44 visage perturbedly brooding on the comely young David” (Melville 1962: 78).  
 45 Rather, “Claggart’s envy struck deeper. If askance he eyed the good looks, cheery

1 health, and frank enjoyment of young life in *Billy Budd*, it was because these went  
 2 along with a nature that, as as Claggart magnetically felt, had in its simplicity  
 3 never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent.” (Melville  
 4 1962: 78).

5 Here, and elsewhere in the eleven chapters that make up what Hayford and  
 6 Sealts term the “second phase in Melville’s development of the of the novel,” in  
 7 which “Claggart was either introduced or brought to the fore as as the cause of  
 8 Billy’s predicament” (Heyford and Sealts 1962: 5) , Melville delves much more  
 9 deeply into the psychological and intellectual dimensions of the belief complex  
 10 than he had in his earlier novels, anticipating by more than a century the  
 11 discoveries of contemporary envy/jealousy theorists such as Mervyn Nicholson:

12  
 13 Envy is close to jealousy—the feeling of anger and hostility toward someone of  
 14 preferred status or quality, but it is also close to malice—an unmotivated hatred that  
 15 seeks to damage another person, and that enjoys the suffering of others: a hatred of  
 16 what is good *because* it is good. Thus, unavoidably, envy takes us deeply into the  
 17 mystery of evil, in a way that few topics can” (Nicholson 1999: 2).

18  
 19 Although Nicholson makes no mention of Melville or *Billy Budd*, he  
 20 addresses here one of the novel’s central concerns, the “mystery of evil” or as the  
 21 narrator puts it the “mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or  
 22 corruptingbooks or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short, 'a  
 23 depravity according to nature'" (Melville 1962: 76).

24 Through the nine chapters leading up to the climactic accusation and  
 25 confrontation scenes (chapters 18 and 19), Claggart has been careful to conceal  
 26 from public view his iniquitous and invidious nature and to avoid what Louis  
 27 Jones refers to in another context as “the direct, long-held, piercing stare” that  
 28 “people fear and recognize as the [mark of] one who carries malevolent power”  
 29 (Jones 1951: 15). But by the end of Ch. 17, the “monomania in the man—if that  
 30 indeed it were-- . . . like a subterranean fire, was eating its way deeper and deeper  
 31 in him.” And so “Something decisive must come of it” (Melville 1962: 90).

32 The first of those decisive actions, recounted in Ch. 18, where Claggart seeks  
 33 an audience with Captain Vere on the quarter deck to accuse Billy of mutiny, sets  
 34 the stage for the far more decisive events that take place in Vere’s cabin in Ch. 19,  
 35 where the diverse elements of the evil eye belief complex converge. Once again, an  
 36 understanding of the folk belief complex helps illuminate the fictional situation.  
 37 As Sam Migliore reminds us in *Mal’uocchio: Ambiguity, Evil Ey, and the*  
 38 *Language of Distress*, *mal’uocchio* (the evil eye) in the folk cultural context  
 39 “involves primarily two components—1) a gazer, . . . who possesses the power to  
 40 cause harm by directing a glance . . . at another individual in anger, envy . . . , or  
 41 simply overadmiration; and 2) the victims . . . (the stricken)—anyone exposed to  
 42 and affected by *mal’uocchio*” (Migliore 1997: 34)—both of whom are negatively  
 43 impacted by this interpersonal encounter. The gazer, Migliori argues, “is capable  
 44 of injuring others because he or she is in a highly emotional state, and because  
 45 emotions such as envy (*mimidia*) activate and increase an individual’s strength to  
 46 the point at which *mal uocchio* becomes effective” (Migliore 1997: 35). Yet envy

1 is such a powerful emotion it “can also turn inward,” creating a state of  
 2 disequilibrium as profound as that experienced by victims of the evil eye, who “are  
 3 susceptible to *mal’uocchiu* because their strenth/weakness balance has been  
 4 disrupted by a physical disability, previous exposure to the phenomenon, or other  
 5 factors” (Migliore 1997: 34), often resulting in “mental disorders; partial or total  
 6 paralysis; and, in rare cases, death” (Migliore 1997: 36).

7 The climactic confrontation between Claggart and Billy follows closely the  
 8 “process of social interaction” (Migliore 1997: 360) outlined by Migliori and  
 9 numerous other ethnographers (see in particular Garrison and Arensberg, Hand,  
 10 and Siebers), beginning with a direct ocular attack by Claggart (the gazer) and its  
 11 effect on the Billy (the gazee), who is unable to move or speak: “Claggart  
 12 deliberately advanced within short distance of Billy and, mesmerically looking him  
 13 in the eye, recapitulated the accusation [of muntinty]. . . . Not at first did Billy take  
 14 it in. When he did, the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as if by white leprosy.  
 15 He stood like one impaled and gagged” (Melville 1962: 98).

16 Emboldened by Billy’s inability to respond, Claggart continues his assault, the  
 17 effects of which are magnified by dramatic changes in the color and size of his  
 18 eyes:

19  
 20       Meanwhile, the accuser’s eyes, removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones,  
 21       underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a  
 22       muddy purple. Those lights of human intelligence, losing human expression, were  
 23       gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep.  
 24       The first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the  
 25       paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish (Melville 1962: 98).

26  
 27       Given the potency of Claggart’s gaze and its association with both  
 28       mesmerism—which according to Elworthy was for centuries synonymous with the  
 29       word “fascination” (Elworthy 1895, 1958: 7)—and two of the most feared animal  
 30       fascinator the serpent and the torpedo fish (see in particular Siebers 1983: 62 ), it  
 31       is not surprising that “such an accusation so suddenly sprung on inexperienced  
 32       nonage” coupled with “the horror of the accuser’s eyes” would first “bring out his  
 33       lurking defect” (Melville 1962: 98) and ultimately end in “confirming the  
 34       paralysis” (Melville 1962: 99).

35       What is surprising, from a folkloristic perspective, is the suddenness with  
 36       which Billy’s paralysis (a common symptom of overlooking) is transformed into  
 37       physical violence (an uncommon occurrence in most folk communities, where  
 38       amuletic magic and community support offer alternative ways of annulling or  
 39       deflecting the evil eye): “quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night,”  
 40       Billy’s “arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck” (Melville 1962: 99).  
 41       While it is possible that in this instance Melville had in mind an atypical version of  
 42       the evil eye event, such as the Scottish tradition of “scoring aboon the breath,” in  
 43       which the victim of the evil eye or someone acting on the victim's behalf  
 44       physically attacks the suspected fascinator, “drawing a blunt instrument across the  
 45       forehead to the effusion of blood” (Davidson 1950: 147), it seems more likely that



he was simply following his long-standing practice of combining details culled from his sources, both oral and written, with his own imaginative inventions—a process much like that described by folklore/literature scholars Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan in *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*:

As in social interaction, folklore in literature may . . . find its meanings from the contexts where it apperas—in the life world of the fictional narrative as in the original context from which it has been de-situated. Meaning is multivalent and the very process of de- and re-situation involves many choices and complexities” (de Caro and Jordan 2004: 267).

In the man-of-war world of *Billy Budd*, where violence is the norm, the cannon-like discharge of Billy’s arm is as natural as the typically non-violent means of combatting the evil eye in the folk context, and the confrontation scene as a whole constitutes one of the most sustained and ethnographically accurate accounts of the evil eye event in American literature and also serves as the final act of the folk drama rehearsed decades earlier in *Mardi*, *Redburn*, and *Moby Dick*.

Taken together, these four works, spanning over four decades of Melville’s life, offer a rare glimpse of the evolution of a complex folkloric phenomenon in literary contexts as varied as the social and cultural settings in which it is traditionally situated, revealing in their own unique ways Melville’s intuitive awareness of principles articulated over a hundred years later by cultural anthropologist Sam Migliori: “The evil eye, he argues, is not something specific and absolute; it is an ambiguous cultural construct whose meaning varies cross-culturally, and that is open to interpretation, argument, and negotiation within specific sociocultural [and literary] contexts” (12). Of all this, and more, Ishmael might have said, the evil eye is a symbol.

## References

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