Billy Budd Study Guide

Billy Budd by Herman Melville

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Billy Budd Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....5
Author Biography....6
Plot Summary....7
Chapter 1....9
Chapter 2....11
Chapter 3....12
Chapter 4....13
Chapter 5....14
Chapter 6....15
Chapter 7....17
Chapter 8....18
Chapter 9....20
Chapter 10....21
Chapter 11....22
Chapter 12....23
Chapter 13....24
Chapter 14....25
Chapter 15....26
Chapter 16....27
Chapter 17....28
Chapter 18....29
Chapter 19....30
Chapter 20....32

Chapter 21 33

Chapter 22 35

Chapter 23 36

Chapter 24 37

Chapter 25 38

Chapter 26 39

Chapter 27 40

Chapter 28 41

Chapter 29 42

Chapter 30 43

Characters 45

Themes 51

Style 54

Historical Context 56

Critical Overview 58

Criticism 60

Critical Essay #1 61

Critical Essay #2 65

Critical Essay #3 67

Adaptations 74

Topics for Further Study 75

Compare and Contrast 76

What Do I Read Next? 78

Further Study 79

Bibliography 83

Copyright Information 84

Introduction

When Herman Melville began working on what was to be his final novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative,* his years of renown as a celebrated American author were well behind him. He had worked in the New York Customhouse for nearly two decades, until 1885, when he retired from his job and returned to his writing. Sometime between 1885 and 1891, Melville wrote a poem, "Billy in the Darbies," about a young sailor who had been executed for his involvement in a mutinous plot. In 1888, Melville read an article called 'The Mutiny on the Somers," which related the story of three sailors who in 1842 had been convicted of mutiny on board the U.S. brig *Somers.* Melville's older cousin had been one of the officers involved in the sailors' conviction, and his family knew details of the case that the public did not know. A split between what Melville biographer Leon Howard calls "the inside story and the historical record" - what really happened and what was reported - inspired Melville to expand his poem about Billy into a longer prose work with the subtitle "An Inside Narrative." However, Melville died in September 1891, six months after apparently finishing work on the book, and *Billy Budd* was left unpublished until 1924, when it was discovered among Melville's papers.

Raymond Weaver's 1921 publication of his Melville biography, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic,* sparked a revival of interest in the works of the largely forgotten writer. In 1924, Weaver brought out *The Collected Works* of Melville, which includes the first edition of *Billy Budd,* and critics greeted the short novel enthusiastically, admiring its perceptiveness and its moral and symbolic complexity. Treating such weighty themes as duty and conscience, good and evil, justice, and guilt and innocence, Melville's final novel is considered one of his masterpieces.

Author Biography

Herman Melville's reputation seesawed from popularity to obscurity and back again over much of his lifetime and beyond, but now his position is secure as one of America's greatest authors. Best known now for his masterpiece novel *Moby-Dick (1851).* Melville first became popular as a writer in the 1840s for his novels of adventure in the South Seas: ***Typee*** (1846) and ***Omoo* (1847).** Born in New York City in 1819, Melville had been attracted to the sea and ships at a young age. and his first two novels, fictional romances inspired by his own seagoing adventures, were warmly received by readers.

After his early success with *Typee* and *Omoo,* Melville disappointed his audience with his third novel, *Manii* (1849). which took a philosophical and metaphysical turn away from his previous narratives. More conventional sea novels ***Redburn*** (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) - his attempts to win his audience back - briefly appeased his readers, but then with the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851, followed by *Pierre* in 1852, Melville had lost his audience altogether. *Moby-Dick,* a novel ostensibly about whaling but actually about the human condition, had found a small but appreciative critical audience, but *Pierre,* a dark, somewhat autobiographical novel, was a critical as well as popular failure. The public who had loved his South Seas novels thought that Melville had gone mad.

After the dismal failure of *Pierre,* Melville decided to produce shorter prose pieces for publication in magazines. For a few years he honed his skill at writing these short works, producing such tales as "Benito Cereno" and "The Encaniadas", before coming out with another full-length novel. *The Confidence-Man.* published in 1857, was the last prose piece that Melville would publish in his lifetime. This final novel, a satire which deals with confidence men on board a riverboat on April Fool's Day, was a failure,

Disappointed, Melville turned to writing poetry and eventually obtained a position as an inspector in the New York Customhouse, which he held for nearly 20 years. After his retirement, Melville continued to write poems, and sometime after 1888 he began work on a short novel - *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative* - which had grown out of his poem, "Billy in the Darbies". Melville's expansion upon the poem about the young sailor who had been implicated in a mutiny conspiracy was probably spurred by his having read an article about an 1842 mutiny plot on the U.S. brig ***Somers.*** Melville stopped work on *Billy Budd* in April, 1891, but then he died five months later, leaving the work unfinished and unpublished.

The manuscript of *Billy Budd* was not published until 1924, when it was discovered among Melville's papers. Modem. 1920s America was ready for Melville in a way that his own late nineteenth century had not been. With the 1921 publication of Raymond Weaver's biography *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* and then the 1924 publication of *The Collected Works* of Melville, which contained the first published edition of *Billy Budd.* Melville's critical reputation soared, and the author who was virtually unknown at his death was essentially rediscovered and venerated.

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Plot Summary

Chapters 1-8

In the first eight chapters, the narrator attempts to sketch the histories of these men - first Billy Budd, then Captain Vere, then John Claggart. Billy is "impressed" (forced) into the British navy, then (1797) at war with the French. A lieutenant boards the merchant ship, the *Rights-of-Man,* that Billy has worked on for some time, and selects only him to bolster the crew of the *Bellipotent,* without any consideration of Billy's or the merchant captain's desires. Apparently Billy was selected because he has the charismatic qualities of what the narrator calls the "Handsome Sailor," a leader both physically and morally. Billy appears to be exceedingly simple, an "upright barbarian," but factual knowledge of him is limited to his status as an orphan. Of his family history only speculation is possible. Captain Vere, on the other hand, traces his ancestors well back into the seventeenth century; he is well read, respected for his intelligence and open heart; he is a dedicated seaman and an efficient disciplinarian. About as much of Claggart's life before service on the *Bellipotent* is known "as an astronomer knows about a comet's travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky."

Chapters 9-19

Chapters 9 through 17 develop the antagonism between Claggart and Budd - though "antagonism" must be used in a qualified manner since Budd holds no grudge against Claggart, and simply cannot understand why Claggart would dislike him. The reasons for this antagonism are unknown. The narrator suggests that perhaps the older man envied Billy's personal beauty, or saw in Billy the innocence he had lost. Because Claggart could "really form no conception of an unreciprocated malice," he contrives traps for Billy. Three incidents occur that test Billy's goodwill. Claggart has an underling disturb Billy's possessions so that he would fail inspection. Then Billy accidentally spills his soup in front of Claggart, who reads the mess as intentional. Finally, another stooge of Claggart's fails to tempt Billy into mutinous plots, even though Billy could justly resent having been impressed on board.

Since none of these incidents produce Billy's downfall, Claggart escalates his attack by taking advantage of a failed chase of a French warship, in chapter 18, to corner the captain and claim (falsely) that Billy had just revealed mutinous intentions. Vere is skeptical but arranges to question the two men privately in his cabin. In chapter 19, Claggart calmly accuses Billy, and instead of answering Claggart and clearing himself in front of the captain, Billy stutters and strikes Claggart directly on the forehead, killing him instantly.

Chapters 20-27

In chapters 20 and 21 Billy is tried before the captain and three officers. He says to the court, could "I have used my tongue I would not have struck [Claggart]." All four judges appear to believe in Billy's good intentions, but Vere ultimately convinces them all that their duty is to hang Billy They must send a clear message to the sailors that even the taint of "mutiny" on your name will result in severe punishment. "For that law [the Mutiny Act] and the rigor of it," Vere says, "we are not responsible."

Chapters 22 to 27 describe the last few hours of Billy's short life. Vere tells Billy of his sentence, in such a way that added to the feeling he already had for the good captain, and Billy seems to respect Vere all the more. Billy has one more night and spends the time peacefully and alone. At sunrise, the "Handsome Sailor" is hung. There is some grumbling of discontent among the sailors at this seemingly unwarranted event, but naval discipline represses any actual signs of protest. The body is wrapped in what was once his hammock, and, like Claggart's body a few hours earlier, tossed into the ocean.

Chapters 28-30

In the final three chapters, the narrator follows the fate of Captain Vere, includes (he naval report on the incident, tells how the spar from which Billy was hung was "converted into a monument," and includes a poem by one of the sailors who knew Billy. Vere dies soon after in a fight with a French ship, and the men on board the *Bellipotent* who were present when Billy died all take a shard of the beam from which Billy was hung, since to "'them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross." With these shards, the men remember Billy. The poem "Billy in the Darbies," which speculates on how Billy might have spoken in his last hours, closes the novel: "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist."

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The nickname of "Handsome Sailor" is bestowed on one young man who is particularly adept at his job on a ship; possesses extraordinary strength, beauty, and superior moral character; and is in possession of rare leadership qualities. The narrator cites an example he once observed: a very black native African "of the unadulterated blood of Ham." Bigger than the average man, he was dressed in colorful garb and wore large gold hoops in his ears. He was the jovial center of a group of his admiring shipmates who were of various shades, hues, and cultures.

This story is about another sailor, Billy Budd, a 21-year-old fair-skinned, blue-eyed foretopman of the British fleet toward the end of the 1790s, who is also exemplary of the "Handsome Sailor" title. He has recently been impressed into the King's service from a homeward-bound English merchantman, Rights of Man, into an outward-bound seventy-four, the HMS. Bellipotent. Upon boarding the commercial ship, Lieutenant Ratcliffe of the Bellipotent immediately selects Billy from among all the other sailors, and he goes along without protest. The response of the lieutenant is that the king will be happy to know that the Captain has cheerfully surrendered the "flower of his flock."

Captain Graveling, Billy's captain aboard the merchantman, protests to the lieutenant. He explains that because Billy is so competent and so popular, his once rowdy ship has been peaceful. Before Billy came on board, it had been "a rat-pit of quarrels," the captain says. When he joined the crew, he was immediately popular with all the men except the one who had been their leader, Red Whiskers, who continually insulted him. Billy remained pleasant and tried to reason with this "big, shaggy chap with fiery red whiskers." When his insults didn't work, Red Whiskers one day touched him under the ribs with a knife whereupon Billy "quick as lightning" let his arm fly and gave the big sailor a sound drubbing. Following this, Red was Billy's friend and supporter for life. With Billy gone, the Captain declared, "There will be no harmony on board."

On board his new ship, Billy is made foretopman and assigned to the starboard watch. Other sailors who had been impressed complain about being taken unwillingly from the merchant ship when they were on their way home, but not Billy. He is cheerful and well liked by his new fellow crew members.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The way Billy deals with Red Whiskers foreshadows the climax of the story when he strikes Claggart, who has attacked him, not physically, but verbally. We already know that he will strike out if sufficiently provoked, and that he is quite capable of defending himself. In chapter 1, Melville delineates the character of the hero/protagonist. While he

continues to be developed in more detail throughout the story, we come to know in the first chapter what the major character is like.

Writers generally write about what they know, and, to some extent, almost all fiction is autobiographical. In order to understand what is going on in this story, it helps to know a little bit about the life of this major American writer. Following the death of his father and the loss of the family fortune, when he was twenty-one years old, Herman signed onto a whaling ship on its way to the Pacific. The captain was so cruel, insensitive, and unjust to his crew that the young man deserted at the Marquesas Islands.

Although cannibals inhabited the island he was on, Melville was treated well and after four months was rescued by an Australian whaler and eventually made his way back to the United States. He had short-term experiences on other ships, and while his shipboard encounters were limited, he had enough material to write several stories about life on the sea. Most particularly for Billy Budd, his cruel and unjust treatment by the captain and his association in suffering with his fellow sailors provided the background and the motivation to write about the life of the crews on ships in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Melville chose the British Navy for his setting for this story for many reasons. Perhaps the major one is that it had more large ships and a well-developed system of governance, which is vital to this story. Another reason may very well be that there were major mutinies on British ships in the waning years of the 18th century, which made it possible for him to raise the issues of insurrection, justice, and camaraderie among the crewmembers. It certainly gave him the opportunity to explore issues relating to the treatment of the crewmen who made it possible for Great Britain to float by far the largest fleet in the world at that time and to hold unprecedented sea power.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Billy actually looks younger than his 21 years. The narrator describes him as being a fine physical example of unadulterated Saxon features, "in fact that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules." When asked where he was born and who his father was, Billy straightforwardly reveals that he was a foundling. The narrator suggests that he appears to be of noble descent.

In his new environment, he proceeds with the same unselfconsciousness that had made him so popular on the Rights-of-Man although this is a much more complicated and experienced group of sailors. Inexperienced as he is, he seems unaware that some of the older, more seasoned crew members are not quite so enthusiastic about his presence aboard their vessel as were those on the merchant ship. As perfect as this Handsome Sailor seems, he has one flaw-when under great stress, he becomes a stutterer and sometimes even loses his voice entirely. His nature is so tranquil that this weakness rarely exhibits itself.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Melville often uses images from ancient Greece to describe Billy. He looks like the heroes that survive in the sculptures from that period. The concept of the fatal flaw in literature dates from the ancient Greek dramatists whose heroes were, like Billy, overdrawn, larger than nature; so heroic the imagination is stretched. Nevertheless, they always had one fatal flaw that became their undoing. This is also true with Billy. He is larger than life. He is more beautiful than one sees in nature. He is too perfect. He excels in all aspects of his life-in appearance, in motivation, in his interactions with his fellow workers, in his outlook on life. Yet, like the Greek heroes of old, he has one fatal flaw that will do him in and will account for the climax of this story.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In April of 1797, mutiny on the high seas in the British Navy reared its ugly head; the first eruption at Spithead was followed by a more serious outbreak in the fleet at the Nore-this one called "the Great Mutiny." Justifiable small grievances ignored had grown and exploded. Little can be found in the history books about the insurrection or its serious nature because it was such an embarrassment to the proud nation that at that time ruled the seas that publicity about it was suppressed. Terms were negotiated and peace was restored, and some of those very mutineers played a role in Lord Nelson's triumphs on the Nile and at Trafalgar.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Mutiny was defined as an act of defiance upon naval authority by anyone subject to that authority. The safety of a ship was thought to depend upon the submission of all persons on board to the will of the captain. For that reason, he had sweeping disciplinary powers, even the power to inflict the death penalty without a court martial.

The reference to Spithead refers to the most famous mutiny of all, the one that preceded the one at Nore. The HMS Bounty, whose captain was William Bligh, was sailing from Spithead on the English Channel to the South Seas to collect breadfruit when it was seized by Fletcher Christian, the master's mate, on April 28, 1789. Bligh and 18 members of the crew who were loyal to him were set adrift in the ship's longboat and made their way 3,600 miles to Timor, itself a remarkable feat, and the fact that they survived. Three of the mutineers were hanged. But more significant to our story, Bligh was later made captain of the HMS Director, and his crew on that ship joined the mutiny of the Nore of our story in 1797.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The narrator now apologizes for taking a bypath. He compares the changes in sea warfare since the date mentioned in Chapter 3 to the changes in battle brought about by the introduction of gunpowder into Europe. Thus, in the current age, the nobler qualities of the naval heroes have become obsolete. For example, a star has been inserted in the Victory's quarterdeck to mark the spot where Nelson fell.

Some would say that Nelson's ostentatious focus on himself in battle not only was unnecessary but not military-that it was the mark of foolhardiness and vanity. Some would even say that he might have survived Trafalgar but for his bravado, and the many losses in the storm that followed the battle might have been avoided. In Nelson's defense, few commanders were as capable at strategy; reckless or not; he was successful where others who were more prudent were not. He was hailed afterward not as the greatest soldier of all time but as the greatest sailor since our world began

Chapter 4 Analysis

The point of view in this story is that of Melville, himself, the narrator, who serves part of the time as historian, sometimes as a sociologist analyzing the group behaviors of the sailors, and sometimes as storyteller. In this chapter, he steps out of his role as storyteller and gives us not only actual history but commentary. He evaluates Admiral Nelson as a hero, but he also makes judgments about the decisions he made. This foreshadows the climax of this story where the decision made by the captain of this ship to execute Billy Budd is not only questioned by his own crew, but is questionable in light of the outcome of the story.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The mutiny at the Nore was put down, but there was still discontent across the navy. Special measures were taken to keep the sailors under control. It was said that Nelson did much to achieve that by putting forth the effort to win them rather than to terrorize them into submission. However, anxiety did exist on many quarterdecks and precautionary vigilance was exercised to avoid a relapse.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In thinking about the setting of a story and how it affects its overall impression and meaning, it is important to look at all factors that make up the background. The physical one is, of course, extremely important in this story. A ship, especially a large one like the Bellipotent that is often at sea and isolated for long periods, is inevitably a microcosm. Life and death decisions are made without recourse to the outside world. Benevolent circumstances such, as a calm sea when life is good is a mirror of the larger world. Storms and threats to the ship also mirror the larger world, and the issue of what is just is as problematical in the larger world as it is on board the Bellipotent.

However, there's much more to the setting in this story than the merely physical. The social, emotional, and even historical settings play a vital role in its development. The writer frequently compares what the social climate is like on board ship as compared to the world at large. He points out that relationships between and among the sailors is so complicated that insurrection is always just below the surface. And just as governments that ignore the rights of their citizens foment wars and revolutions, so the "government" on board the ships is responsible for the outbreaks that have threatened the greatest navy and greatest fighting force of the world of that age. England, a small island off the coast of Europe, virtually ruled the world because of the superiority of its navy. But not until they were forced by the mutinies and the threat of mutiny did those who controlled the British navy accept that the lowest seamen had the power to do what other nations could not do-destroy this great military force.

This setting and background play a key role in the story. Claggart is able to use this unease, this fear of mutiny, to bring the story to a climax. We don't believe that Claggart would have succeeded. The hero of the story is so valiant that his defense would have been effective. Because of his fatal flaw of his inability to speak when under great stress; the story has an entirely different ending. In a way, it is his great physical strength, an essential characteristic for a Handsome Sailor that brought on the disaster.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

On the Bellipotent, there is no suggestion that there is a threat of mutiny; it is, in fact, a well-oiled machine. Credit for this goes to the captain, the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere, a sailor of great distinction. He looks after the welfare of his men but he is also a strict disciplinarian. His officers and crew show him respect both on board ship and on land, where he dresses and conducts himself as a gentleman. He had been cited for gallantry in the West Indian waters.

He was dubbed "Starry Vere" by one of his kinsmen upon his return from the West Indian triumph to distinguish him from another family member who was also in the navy. The designation taken from the following poem by Andrew Marvell describes this distinction:

"This 'tis to have been from the first
In a domestic heaven nursed,
Under the discipline severe
Of Fairfax and the starry Vere."

Chapter 6 Analysis

We now have the introduction of another major player in the story. This is no Captain Bligh who mistreats and insults his men but an exemplary leader who pays attention to what is happening on his ship and has a kindly interest in his men. It is possible that this is the "new" captain in His Majesty's Navy-the post-Nore version. Nelson realized that the problems that brought on the mutinies lay in the quality of the captaining, so changes were made; the welfare of the sailors became a matter of concern and action, and the result was a ship like the Bellipotent where tranquility reigns. This makes the dramatic climax even more striking and mystifying. Mutiny was not being threatened, yet a diabolical officer bent on destroying an innocent one was able to use it to bring him down.

Irony may be described as an occurrence that turns out in a way that could not reasonably have been anticipated. Melville, along with other writers in his period, used irony extensively. The irony here is that we were led to expect that Claggart would not succeed in convincing the captain that Billy was fomenting mutiny, and that turned out as expected; however, what we did not expect is that Claggart, himself, would become the victim and Billy would become the criminal. This is the ironic twist that makes the story so memorable. Also, the outcome of this story makes the name of the ship he was taken from, the Rights of Man, an example of extreme irony.

Stories like *Moby Dick* and others made Melville very popular when he was alive, and he is surprisingly popular yet today. *Billy Budd* was his last novel and was not quite complete when he died in 1891. This book was not published until 1924.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The captain is an intellectual, one who loves books and who never goes to sea without bringing new ones with him to fill the hours on board. A captain leads an essentially lonely life, and Starry Vere particularly favors biography, history, and realistic writers like Montaigne to fill his solitary hours. Thanks to his intellectual bent and the kind of reading he indulges himself in, he is possessed of very firm convictions, which the narrator notes is a good thing considering the troubled period he finds himself in.

Some of his officers found Starry Vere dry and bookish and not an ideal companion. They acknowledge that as a seaman he is superior, but personally they find him a bit too pedantic. To make a point, he sometimes cites authorities that only one as well read as he would know about, not taking into consideration that others might find him boring and obtuse.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The narrator feels that the character of Captain Vere needs to be expanded and uses this chapter to do that. When a writer goes to the trouble to fill a character out as Melville does this one, he is giving his readers a clue that this is a major player in the story. Characterization is the term used for the devices a writer uses to create a character - to convey to the reader the character's personality. A round character is one that is complex and usually undergoes change in the course of the story, as this character does in the denouement, the unwinding of the various strands following the climax. A flat character is the opposite of a round character; typically only two-dimensional and uncomplicated. Flat characters normally serve only functionally because they are necessary to give information important to the action. An example in this story of a flat character is the old sailor who befriends Billy and tries to warn him about Claggart.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

John Claggart, the master-at-arms, is introduced in this chapter. Originally, the title of master-at-arms had been given to the petty officer whose function is to instruct the men in the use of arms-sword or cutlass., Because of advances in gunnery and explosives, this particular officer is now a sort of chief of police who, among other things, maintains order on the lower gun decks where most of the crew live and work.

Claggart would not stand out in a crowd, in contrast to Billy Budd, who draws attention wherever he goes because of his appearance. Claggart is, in fact, described as being almost effeminate in appearance, paler than the other sailors, black curly hair and a beardless chin. His background is a mystery to the other crew members although there is a rumor that he is from a noble family and has volunteered for duty in the navy to escape a swindle conviction. On a ship, such a rumor is typically treated as fact. The fact that he is a man of obvious accomplishments without prior nautical experience and has entered the navy at the age of thirty-five years at the lowest grade and whose background is kept a mystery feeds the rumor. There is also a possibility that he had been forced to go to sea by the police,. Many insolvent debtors and others who found themselves in trouble with the law found refuge and sanctuary in the navy. The narrator knows by certainty some recruits have been taken forcibly from the jails.

Claggart's suspect background is typically not popular with the crew. Given all this, it must be acknowledged that when Claggart entered the navy he was assigned to the least honorable section of a man-of-war's crew and worked his way up to his position by his own exemplary behavior and the manifestation of a "certain austere patriotism."

Chapter 8 Analysis

John Claggart, the master-at-arms is described in some detail here because he plays the role of antagonist in this story. The rumors about his background foreshadow later actions on his part. He is unpopular because of his job, and he is not particularly popular with the crew because of the rumors about his background. The rumors of prior criminal behavior are evidence of his devious behavior and his "certain austere patriotism" foretell his accusations of Billy in the climax to the story. We are already expecting that life on board the ship is not entirely tranquil and that this character may be involved in rippling the waters.

A successful writer is a master of contrast, and Melville certainly qualifies in that category. He continually compares Claggart and Budd. It's not that Claggart is homely; he is just not as handsome as our hero. Whereas Billy is defined as the ultimate in manly conformation, Claggart has effeminate qualities. Billy's skin glows golden and he is the epitome of masculinity while Claggart is very pale, partly because he spends most

of his life below deck. According to Melville, the motivation for his deplorable attempt to destroy the hero is envy; for that reason, the contrast between the two must be clearly drawn.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Billy enjoys his life as a foretopman. He has leisure-time once his duties are taken care of, and his location makes it possible for him to enjoy the company of other sailors at ease in the sunny upper deck rather than the gloomier lower decks. He is so devoted to duty that his fellow crewmen sometimes laugh at him. He once witnessed the scourging of a young sailor who had been cited for dereliction, and Billy is determined never to find himself in that position.

Suddenly Billy is reprimanded because someone is playing dirty tricks on him - such as stowing his bag where it is not supposed to be. He speaks to some of his topmates about it but they don't take him seriously. He makes friends with an older sailor who had fought with Nelson and is now virtually retired but has a position where he looks after gear. He has time on his hands now so he and Billy talk sometimes. Billy tells him about the mysterious dirty tricks being played on him. The old man likes Billy and nicknames him "Baby Budd." He tells him that the master-at-arms (Claggart) is down on him. Billy finds it hard to believe, but the old sailor is firm. He doesn't offer any advice, just the information.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The oppositions are set up in this chapter - Claggart vs. Budd. This is a story about good and evil, and Melville may go over the top a little in portraying these two characters. Billy may be too good to be believed, and Claggart's motivations are not easy to grasp. We also see an important example of contrast here. Billy, the baby, is so innocent and naïve that he does not really know what is going on aboard this ship. The experienced old sailor may not be very active in the life of the crew, but even he knows that Claggart is out to get our hero.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

An occurrence at lunch the following day confirms Billy's conviction that the old sailor is wrong. The ship lurches and Billy spills his soup just as Claggart comes by. Claggart's response to the incident is "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" Everyone takes this as a joke and Billy feels that if he is referring to him as the "Handsome Sailor," he must not be down on him. However, the narrator notes that the expression on Claggart's face is not one of amusement, something that Billy and the others miss.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Melville goes to great lengths to show how inexperienced, gullible, and innocent Billy appears to be because it is important to the ultimate meaning of the story. Billy should have known that Claggart was not his friend, that he was not an admirer as many of the crewmembers were of the "Handsome Sailor." As the story progresses, the writer gives us sociology lesson about the simple-mindedness of the sailors.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

What does Claggart have against Billy? Why is he "down on him"? One might suspect that something happened before the two found themselves together on the Bellipotent, but this was not the case. The narrator ascribes it to the tendency of a person to sometimes have a natural antipathy toward another without any obvious reason that can be a problem on a ship because of the close quarters. One crew member simply cannot avoid contact with any other crew member.

The narrator concludes that the reason is a certain moral depravity exists in some men but that does not come to light except when evoked by some special object. These men seem on the surface to be rational and even-tempered; but are , in fact not entirely sane. Claggart is this sort of man, according to the narrator; he is evil in a way that is not evidenced by licentious living but is born with a depravity according to nature.

Chapter 11 Analysis

It is at this point that we obtain the reasoning of the writer as to the motivation of the diabolical Claggart. First of all, he counts it off as a personality clash; however, he points out that in order for a natural distaste for another person to become the reason for a heinous plot to destroy him, that person must be at some level not only evil but also deranged. "Depraved" is the term that Melville uses, and he points out that licentious living is not the only manifestation of this kind of evil intent.

Even in Melville's day, manifestations of "evil" and sinfulness were pretty much restricted to sexual license and loose living. Still today, with a more educated and more sophisticated population, it is difficult to turn the focus on such evils as greed, corruption, and obsession with power and control rather than on sexual promiscuity. Sexual misbehavior is considered a scandal where the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer and children go to sleep hungry passes as life as usual. In this story, envy is one of those sins that have disastrous consequences.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Claggart looks good; he is not only neat but also careful in his dress. He pales in comparison to Billy's good looks, cheerful health, and frank enjoyment of life. With Billy's simplicity and naiveté, Billy has never willed malice or felt the sting of envy, which no doubt goads Claggart. It seems likely that it is envy that has inspired Claggart's dislike of the "Handsome Sailor," and the evil fire that burns within him will be acted out sooner or later.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Melville inserts this little chapter to reinforce the point he has made about the contrast between Claggart and Budd; He also makes a point of identifying the particular evil that drives Claggart.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Claggart actually feels that the spilled soup was intentional and was aimed at him. He has a secret accomplice nicknamed "Squeak" (because he is likened to a rat that ferrets out interlopers) who feeds his antipathy to Billy with telltale reports. He is who is playing the dirty tricks on Billy on behalf and at the suggestion of the master-at-arms. Squeak, a troublemaker, also reports lies about things Billy has said about Claggart. Since Claggart is looking for reasons for his ill feelings toward the foretopman, he doesn't check out Squeak's reports. The clandestine persecution of Billy hasn't shaken this young man's cheerful demeanor or changed the cheerful way he approaches his fellow crewmen, so Claggart is looking for some outward demonstration that his patience is wearing thin. The spilled soup, only an accident, actually gives Claggart the evidence he needs to support his case.

Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter does nothing to move the plot along. However, it does clarify how Claggart is accomplishing his dirty tricks, and we learn more about Squeak - the devil's helper in this drama. In this case, the helper joins in the effort-he feeds the fire that is burning in Claggart by creating lies about Billy. We already know that our happy-go-lucky hero does not go around making disparaging remarks about anyone-certainly not Claggart, whom he considers his friend.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

One warm evening, Billy went to the uppermost deck to sleep since the heat was uncomfortable in the sleeping area below-deck. Another sailor awakens him from deep sleep and asks Billy to go to a secluded area where the sailor tries to give him money to join him and other crew members in an insurrection. It makes Billy so angry that he stutters out his refusal to go along and threatens to throw the other sailor overboard.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This short chapter does set the stage for the action that brings on the climax. This connects Billy with a possible threat of mutiny so that Claggart will have something to take to the captain. With Billy's violent reaction to the suggestion that he might do this wrong thing, the writer foreshadows again the climax when Billy does use physical force when Claggart accuses him of misbehavior.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Billy is disturbed by the incident. He's not even sure what plot he was being asked to be a part of. He has never before in his life been solicited to do evil, and it bothers him. He tries to identify the man who made the proposition, but he is not sure enough to approach him. However, the one he has picked out as possibly being the one who approached him begins to be very friendly when they chance to meet.

Now he doesn't know what to do. If it was an invitation to mutiny, Billy is obligated to report it. He doesn't want to be a tattle-tale, and he isn't sure what was proposed to him, so he keeps it to himself. However, he does mention it to the old man whobefriended him. The old man's reaction is to tell him that it is Claggart's doing. He calls the man who did the dirty work a "cat's paw."

Chapter 15 Analysis

The old man is obviously aware of the underground currents on the ship even though Billy isn't. It is possible that Billy is the only one who doesn't know that Claggart is setting him up.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Because of his youth and inexperience, Billy refuses to accept that Claggart is behind the mischief being done to him. The narrator tells us here that sailors, as a class tend to be more childlike and trusting than other men. Their lives are controlled ; they rarely need to make decisions for themselves. They are trained to obey orders without questioning them, whereas landsmen must assume control of their lives early on and have more freedom and flexibility to make choices. As a result, the landsman will learn distrust early in his life and this differentiates him from sailors.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Billy is almost child-like, which is one of the qualities that make him so well-liked. He is an innocent. This old man dubbed him "Baby Budd" because of this quality. While our narrator assures us that seamen as a class tend to be naïve and unsophisticated, Billy seems to have those qualities in the extreme.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

The dirty tricks seem to end, but the excessive friendliness of the man he suspects of having approached him that night with the clandestine proposal becomes even more marked. Claggart looks at him with a "settled meditative and melancholy expression." Sometimes he even seems momentarily pained and sorrowful when he is looking at Billy. If he chances to come upon him suddenly, his eyes quickly flash, and his face reddens. Unfortunately, Billy is unaware of any of this.

Two minor officers, the armorer and captain of the hold, begin to look at Billy in such a way that an observant person would know that they had been influenced by Claggart since they are his messmates. Billy's popularity with the rest of the crew is such that he feels at ease and without suspicion. Why doesn't Billy question the afterguardsman who had approached him? Why doesn't he try to find out who has been doing the dirty tricks and why? The narrator suggests that shrewdness is not in the foretopman's make-up.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The point of view is interesting here. We have had a narrator who seems to be privy to what all the characters are thinking, yet we are limited to his point of view because we don't really know much more about what's going on than Billy does. We get only hints and suggestions. For example, we do know that the looks on Claggart's face and that of his cohorts give their true feelings away. We still don't know what's going on with Claggart.

Suspense keeps a reader reading, and successful writers are masters of this technique. Melville is using suspense here to keep us guessing. We know something is brewing, but we have just enough information to make us wonder and guess. Because of this, we keep turning the pages looking for answers and some resolution from all of this.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

The Bellipotent spots an enemy frigate and gives chase. After the alien ship is pursued for some time, it escapes. Following this incident and when Starry Vere is not in the best mood, Claggart approaches and tells him that in the encounter with the enemy ship he has seen something that he feels he must report about one of the men on the Bellipotent. He reports that he has observed one sailor who is dangerous and appears to be organizing some of those who had been involved in the late serious troubles-mutinies.

While Vere does not entirely trust the carrier of the bad tidings, he demands to know the name of the suspect. When William Budd is named as the possible conspirator, Captain Vere is astonished. However, Claggart points out that his very popularity is being used to persuade the men to follow him. Billy resents this impression.

Captain Vere has been observing the "Handsome Sailor" and has congratulated Lieutenant Ratcliffe upon his good fortune in finding such a fine specimen, who, in the words of our narrator, "in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall." He has observed that Billy has taken his service duties sensibly. In fact, the Captain has been so pleased with the way he has done his job that he is planning to promote him. He has considered him a "King's bargain"-a capital investment for a small outlay for His Britannic Majesty's Navy.

Captain Vere demands evidence from Claggart and warns him against falsely accusing the young man. But Claggart cites all the circumstantial evidence that he has, himself, created with the help of his co-conspirators and assures the captain that substantiating proof is available.

Starry ponders and considers calling for the evidence; however, he knows that if he does that, word will get out. Some of the officers in the area of the ship where the conversation is taking place are already curious about what is going on. Nevertheless, the Captain calls his hammock-boy, a sort of valet whom he can trust. He asks him to bring Billy but as much as possible, to avoid alerting anyone else that he is being summoned.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Now we know what Claggart is up to, and the story's conflicts are clearly drawn-it is Claggart vs. Billy and evil vs. good. This antagonist is not only evil but also clever; he watches for the right moment to approach the captain-a time when he is distracted by other matters. True to the character that Melville has already drawn, the captain does not react spontaneously or quickly. He takes time to think about the accusations. He could have investigated before he brought the accused in, but he did not.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Billy is surprised to be taken to the captain's cabin, but he knows that Vere likes him and he thinks maybe he is going to be promoted. He guesses that the master-at-arms is there to give a report as to his performance of his job.

However, Vere has the valet close the door and guard it. He instructs Claggart to tell Billy to his face what he has been telling the captain about him. The captain intends to watch their faces so he can make a decision about who is telling the truth and who is lying.

Claggart looks at Billy's face and repeats what he has told the captain. Billy is paralyzed, unable to speak, not even in a stutter. "Speak, man!" says Captain Vere. "Defend yourself." Billy is so shocked that anyone would say such vile things about him that he is still unable to speak, even though he is trying. Vere had not known about the speech impediment before now, but he quickly understands it and puts a hand on Billy's shoulder, telling him that there is no hurry, that he should take his time. Billy's heart is touched by the fatherly touch on his shoulder; nevertheless, he reacts by striking Claggart with his very strong right arm. Claggart falls to the deck and is dead.

Captain Vere is now no longer a fatherly figure but the military disciplinarian. He commands Billy to go to an adjacent stateroom and stay there until summoned. Then he sends his valet for the surgeon. The surgeon comes and pronounces Claggart dead. The Captain is very disturbed and says to the surgeon, "It is the divine judgment of Ananias!"

The surgeon still doesn't know what has happened, but Vere says, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" He quickly regains his composure and tells the surgeon the whole story. He tells the surgeon that he will call a drumhead court, and he asks him to tell the lieutenants and the captain of marines and ask them to keep the matter to themselves. Vere also asks the surgeon to help him move the body to a stateroom opposite the one where he has confined Billy.

Chapter 19 Analysis

This is the climax of the action of the story, but there is a twist. Claggart certainly has not won, nor has good been victorious over evil. Claggart is dead; Billy has killed him. Billy is now the perpetrator and has become the evil one. We certainly do not have resolution.

Here we learn as much about the captain as about the other characters. He is capable of warmth and compassion, but he doesn't permit his emotions to interfere with his judgment, particularly when it comes to running his ship. He is a strict conformist where

the law is concerned, but he is suffering. He is a complex and conflicted character. Melville again uses irony here on the part of Billy; what he expects to happen is a far cry from the actual events.

The captain has already made up his mind and calling the drumhead court is just a formality. He will make the decision in this matter, and it will be made by strict conformance to law. The spontaneous response of the captain is to declare the point of this story: Claggart is dead because he has lied; and the lie is not just to the captain, it is a lie before God. It is God who has struck him dead. When he says the angel must die, he is declaring that Billy has been the agent of God in Claggart's punishment.

The story of Ananias comes from the *Book of Acts* in the *New Testament*. Ananias and his wife Sapphira had sold a possession and had brought the money to the apostles; however, they privately kept a part of it for themselves without declaring it. Peter knows the truth and asks Ananias, "Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost?" (*KJV Acts 5:3*). Peter tells him that he has not lied to the apostles; he has lied to God. When Ananias was so condemned by the apostle Peter, he dropped dead. For the captain, the person who has been acting on behalf of Satan is Claggart; he has received divine retribution, but it is coming at a cost.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The surgeon has misgivings about the way the captain is handling the incidents. He feels that what should be done is to follow standard procedure: keep Budd in confinement until they can rejoin the squadron and refer the case to the admiral. He feels that the captain is not himself, but he knows that to argue would be insolence and to resist would be mutiny. So he does what he is told; the other officers share his surprise and concern. They all feel that it is a matter that should be referred to the admiral.

Chapter 20 Analysis

At one time, Melville was a very good friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Much of Hawthorne's work dealt with community attitudes about sin and evil as in his most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Melville shared many of his views regarding organized religion, particularly the Calvinism of their day. He felt that the narrow-minded literalism did not reflect the spirit that Jesus had intended for his Church or as a way for humans to manage their lives or their world. He also strongly opposed its pious bigotry and hypocrisy. Perhaps most importantly for this book, he disagreed with its heavy-handed policing of sin and the use of guilt and shame as tools to destroy those who broke laws set up by vindictive, judgmental ideologues. He and Hawthorne were in agreement that extreme Calvinism was destructive and often more abominable than the evils it warned against.

Billy Budd could be seen as an allegory of Calvinism and its unyielding condemnation of all appearance of evil without taking into account extenuating circumstances. Just as the maritime laws are used to bring "justice" without taking into account the truth of the matter at hand, so Calvinism is not interested in why an individual does not conform to its set of rigid rules. And just as the application of the law without a concern for truth brings about disasters and injustice in this case, just so the handing down of judgment by the Church often ends up in injustice and unfairness. In the case of Billy Budd, the worst kind of result is achieved. An innocent man is murdered in the name of justice. The Church disregards the truly good in its flock, Melville is claiming here, and by insisting on an observance of the letter of its very narrow law, often punishes the just and ignores the cruel small-mindedness of those who are motivated by greed, evil, and personal malice.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Whether or not the captain has come unhinged is a matter of conjecture. The event could not have happened at a worse time, so soon after the suppressed insurrections, a time very critical to naval authority. The way things have turned out, the falsely accused victim has become the perpetrator, and the unfortunate captain must sort the whole thing out. He feels that avoiding publicity, given the tenor of the times, is absolutely essential. He also feels that quick action is necessary so the whole thing can be put behind them rather than letting it fester while they wait to get back to the fleet.

He is criticized for his choices. A drumhead court is convened, and the captain chooses the following to sit on it: the first lieutenant, the captain of marines, and the sailing master. Acknowledging that they are not an ideal jury, he nevertheless proceeds with the trial. The captain is the only witness, and he recounts the incident exactly as it happened. When Billy is asked whether what the captain has said is true, he says that he has told the truth but that Claggart had not. "I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King." Vere responds, "I believe you, my man."

Billy is questioned about malice between him and the master-at-arms, and with no hesitation in his speech says that he bore no malice toward him and is sorry that he is dead. He says that if he could have used his tongue he would not have struck him. "But he foully lied to my face and in presence of my captain, and I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow, God help me!" he said. Captain Vere said, "I believe you, man."

He is then asked whether he knew of any planned insurrection. He takes awhile to answer, which makes the judges wonder, but he is simply struggling with his feelings about tattling on a fellow crew member. When he does answer it is in the negative.

When asked why Claggart did what he did, Billy does not know how to answer. He is as puzzled as they are. However, his confusion could have been construed as guilt. He can't answer and turns his eyes to the captain, who points out that the only person who can answer that question is dead, but that the court must confine its attention to the blow's consequence, and there is no doubt about who is responsible for that.

Budd is given a chance to speak for himself, but his response is, "I have said it all, sir." The captain paces and the court deliberates.

At last, Vere addresses the judges and tells them he understands their hesitation to make a decision in a case where military duty and moral scruple have clashed. They are considering the death penalty for a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom they all feel to be so. Even so, "however pitilessly the law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it." He counsels them that even though their

hearts are moved by the situation, that must not be the deciding factor here. He is aware that it is also their consciences that are giving them concern. Even so, he tells them, they must abide by the law.

In this case, he points out, "In wartime at sea a man-of-war's man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills . . . the blow itself is, according to the Articles of War, a capital crime."

The officer of marines breaks in and points out that Budd intended neither mutiny nor homicide. The captain responds that in a more merciful court that could be considered, but not in a martial one. They must proceed under the Mutiny Act. He urges them to make a decision quickly lest they come under attack from an enemy ship and not be in a position to defend themselves.

The sailing master asks whether they could convict but mitigate the penalty; the captain responds that even if it were lawful for them to make such a decision, the people would not understand. All they would understand is that the foretopman committed homicide plain and clear. And to the people it would look like a homicide committed in an act of mutiny, which would only lead to more mutiny. If they think we flinch, said the captain, that we are afraid of them, they will again be out of control. He declares that he feels for the unfortunate boy and is convinced that Billy, himself, would feel for the judges in their difficult position. Billy Budd is formally convicted and sentenced to be hung at the yardarm in the early morning watch.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The debate over justice and mercy is as old as mankind. Cain slew Able out of jealousy and greed, yet Able lived on. In a modern American court of law, juries must debate to what extent the law must be observed in spite of the circumstances. So this story is partly an effort to define justice. It is also a debate over whose law has precedence-the law of God or the law of man. In this case, the people who make the decision do not believe that justice is being served. They are convinced that they have sent an innocent man to his death, yet they are powerless to make any other decision. The law says he must die, and they are emissaries of the law. They are even required to take into account expediency. He must die, because if he doesn't the navy might be faced with another mutiny. They must ponder whether that is a good enough reason to put an innocent man to death. Whatever else it is, it certainly is not a black and white situation. And maybe that is the point that Melville is making here-that seeing the world in black and white terms is dangerous. Good people are destroyed thereby. Calvinism sees the world only as black and white and good people are destroyed. In the long run, goodness and righteousness are sacrificed.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Captain Vere himself gives Billy the news. He spends some time with the young man and one who saw him leave declares that he is also suffering.

Chapter 22 Analysis

It is hard to know how to feel about Vere. We don't feel that he's being hypocritical when he treats Billy compassionately. But the fact of the matter is, the young man's life is in his hands and he willingly sacrifices it to the system.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

The crew knows that the master-at-arms and the foretopman had gone to the Captain's cabin; they don't know anything else. All hands are called at dogwatch (6:00 a.m.), however, so they know something is amiss. The captain explains what has happened and that the sailor who killed the master-at-arms will be executed in the early morning watch. Claggart's body is buried at sea with all the funeral honors pertaining to his grade. Billy Budd's transfer from the captain's quarters is affected without incident, and the only person permitted to communicate with him is the chaplain.

Chapter 23 Analysis

This chapter simply details the formalities required to move the story to its final stage.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Billy is lying prone between two guns, experiencing for the first time in his optimistic young life the evil of the diabolical incarnate in some men. But he is calm now. The chaplain visits him and, though Billy acknowledges that he will die at dawn, he shows no more understanding of what that means than a child. He shows no fear of death. Billy listens to the chaplain talk about salvation and a Savior more out of his natural politeness than out of awe or reverence. The chaplain withdraws, feeling that innocence might be a better thing than religion with which to face judgment; he kisses him on the cheek before he leaves.

Why didn't the chaplain try to stop the execution? In the first place, it would have been futile. In the second place, it would be out of the bounds of his function, which is clearly proscribed by military law.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Billy may be angelic and an exemplary human being, but he is not religious; and religion is no comfort to him as he faces his death. This is a rather powerful statement about religion. First of all, being religious is clearly not requisite to living a righteous life in Melville's philosophy. And second of all, religion is ineffective in a situation where it is most needed and most has a chance to right a serious wrong. Military law keeps religion firmly in its place-to voice mantras and carry out ceremonies-and religion goes along with this travesty of justice without protest.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

All the crew is assembled on the mainyard for the execution. At the last minute, Billy exclaims, "God bless Captain Vere!" All the crew members are shocked. They expect a convicted felon about to be hanged to condemn his executioner. Almost without thinking, the entire crew responds, "God bless Captain Vere!" At the moment of death a vapory fleece is hanging low in the East and is shot through with "a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended." At the moment of death a hanging victim normally spasms, but there is no movement when this young man dies, a reaction that is marveled at by those who witness the execution.

Chapter 25 Analysis

It's impossible not to think of the dying words of Jesus: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Billy behaves in death as he has in life. He is an astoundingly superior human being, even godlike. The vapory fleece suggests transfiguration, and Melville tells us that Billy has ascended.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

There is discussion regarding the phenomenon of the failure of the body to spasm. Some say it was will power; others ridicule that notion. Some say it was a form of euthanasia. Most conclude that there is no logical explanation.

Chapter 26 Analysis

There is certainly something supernatural about this scene. Again, the crucifixion of Jesus comes to mind. At the moment of Jesus' death, darkness descended on the earth.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

The crew is dispersed except for those who are required to prepare the body for burial and those who are required to manage the sails. Billy's body is rolled into the hammock that has been his bed. All hands are called once more to witness the burial. The body slides into the sea and brings a rush of seagulls. The drums are sounded, and the men return to their stations. A band on the quarterdeck plays a religious tune and the chaplain goes through the customary morning service. By now, the sun has dissolved the vapor that surrounded Billy at the time of his death.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus' body. He wrapped the body in a clean cloth and placed it in his own tomb. Comparisons to a Christ-like figure are extensive in this chapter. Seagulls, which are white (representing purity), circle the body. This can be seen as a halo-like shape indicating the religious context of the event.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

On the return passage from the detached cruise during which the events recorded here occurred, the Bellipotent engaged a French ship, "The Atheist." Captain Vere is hit with a musket ball and is wounded; he is taken to shore and dies shortly afterward. His last words are "Billy Budd."

Chapter 28 Analysis

Melville is using irony again to make his point. Captain Vere is killed in a battle with a ship named "The Atheist." Perhaps God would have approved of the death of Billy Budd. Perhaps the good captain should have taken a stand for what he knew in his heart was right instead of what was right according to the rules laid down by the British navy.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

A severely distorted version of the incident is reported in a naval chronicle under "News from the Mediterranean." In the account, Claggart is treated as a hero who discovered a plot among the lower-class crew led by Billy Budd. The account reads that Budd stabbed Claggart. Budd was no Englishman, the account reads, but a foreigner who had been impressed to serve in the navy. It ends with "The criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard HMS. Bellipotent." And this is all that stands in human record to attest what manner of men were John Claggart and Billy Budd.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Billy's life counts for no more than a distorted version of his death.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

The spar from which the foretopman was suspended becomes a sacred piece to the sailors. They keep track of it and save pieces of it as if they were pieces of the Cross. They don't know all the details but they are convinced that Billy Budd was incapable of either mutiny or murder. One of the foretopmen who had served with him writes a crude poem called, "Billy in the Darbies," which is printed as a ballad and is circulated among the crews for a while.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Billy Budd is drawn by Melville as a Christ-figure. He lived his life on earth as a righteous, compassionate, right-spirited soul just as Jesus did. None could find fault in him except the devil incarnate, Claggart, just as none could find fault in Jesus except the Pharisees. In fact, the narrator says of Claggart, "The Pharisee is the Guy Fawkes prowling in the hid chambers underlying some natures like Claggart's."

Budd is innocent before his accusers just as Jesus was; and just as Captain Vere yielded to the pressure of the naval authority to condemn Billy, Pontius Pilate yielded to the pressure of the politically powerful, the San Hedrin, to condemn Jesus to death. Just as Billy was without sin, so was Jesus.

The execution follows closely the biblical account of the death of Jesus. Billy Budd forgives his executioner, Captain Vere, just as Jesus asked God to forgive his executioners. Heaven sends a vapory fleece to signal that his death has heavenly import just as the sky darkened at the moment of Jesus' death.

Billy's body was wrapped in his hammock and placed in the watery tomb; Jesus' body was wrapped in a clean cloth and placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

Billy does not experience the death spasm expected in a hanging; Jesus bowed his head and said, "It is finished" at the moment of death.

Many sources can be traced for this story. Certainly without his experience on board the various ships he sailed on, Melville could not have written this story. His experience with an abusive captain also provided a background for it. His friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne and their discussions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and the role of religion in society certainly played an important part in the formation of the themes in Billy Budd.

In 1841 on the brig Somers, Midshipman Philip Spencer, son of the United States Secretary of War, was hanged without a court-martial, along with two others, for plotting mutiny. Melville got the actual story from his cousin Guert Gansevoort, who was a judge

in the tribunal that made the decision to execute the men, supporting the sentence demanded by the captain of the brig. The case became a cause célèbre and there was much sympathy in the public for Spencer. His guilt or innocence was much debated in the public, and he became a sort of cult figure, and is still toasted by cadets annually at Annapolis. This true story is no doubt one of the sources for Billy Budd.

Characters

The Afterguardsman

The afterguardsman first appears as a mysterious whispering figure that awakens Billy as he sleeps on deck one warm night. He tries to draw Billy into a shady plot, which angers Billy. Billy sends the man away, raising a commotion, and when the others on board ask what is going on, Billy deliberates whether he should reveal what the afterguardsman has said to him. He decides not to be "a telltale" and keeps the incident to himself, although he is deeply puzzled by it. It is "the first time in his life that he had ever been personally approached in underhand intriguing fashion." When, during the next few days, the afterguardsman nods knowingly at Billy or speaks to him, Billy is "more at a loss than before," Billy's friend the Dansker connects the afterguardsman's act to Claggart's being "down on" Billy.

Beauty

See Billy Budd

Board-Her-in-the-Smoke"

See The Dansker

Baby Budd

See Billy Budd

Billy Budd

In spite of the innocence and simplicity that characterize Billy Budd, he is a complex character in terms of what he represents. His name suggests an almost childlike youthfulness: Although he is an adult, his name, William, is shortened into the child's nickname, Billy, and the Dansker refers to him as "Baby Budd" because he seems so young. His last name, Budd, suggests the immaturity of a flower that has not yet bloomed. And yet it is Billy's very immaturity that brings about his end.

Billy's innocence is the dominant aspect of his character. He is unable to distinguish between his friends and his enemies, or even to comprehend that he might have an enemy. Happy-go-lucky and popular with his fellow sailors, the handsome Billy is scrupulous about following orders and performing his duties correctly. Knowing nothing of his own heritage except that he was a foundling, Billy recalls "young Adam before the

Fall": unburdened by a past, uncomplicated by civilization, meeting the world on his own terms, innocent of evil.

And yet this seemingly perfect human being is indeed flawed: Billy stutters when he becomes agitated. The narrator says that Billy's stutter is Satan's reminder that "I too have a hand here"; no one can escape his power. His innocence ironically comes to function as another flaw because he lacks "that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience." In Billy's encounter with the afterguards-man and his experience with Claggart - his first, puzzling brushes with corruption - "his innocence [is] his blinder," and he is unable to protect himself.

As he faces his execution, Billy exemplifies the Chnstlike nature which critics often note when discussing him. When Billy learns of Claggart's accusation, his face holds "an expression which was a crucifixion to behold." In spite of Captain Vere's decision to go through with Billy's execution, Billy's last words, illustrating his generous and forgiving nature, are "God bless Captain Vere'" At the moment of execution, the fleecy clouds in the eastern sky are "shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision." Then, recalling Christ's ascension into heaven following his resurrection, "Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn." The spar from which Billy is hanged takes on an almost religious significance for the sailors: "To them, a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross."

William Budd

See Billy Budd

The Chaplain

Meeting Billy as Billy prepares to die, the *Bellipotent s* chaplain is amazed by Billy's peacefulness and realizes that he has little to give Billy. He finds Billy's ideas of death to be like those of a child; Billy is "wholly without irrational fear of [death]." And as the chaplain feels that "innocence [is] even a better thing than religion wherewith to go to Judgment," he does not impose himself on Billy The narrator cautions the reader not to expect the chaplain to speak out on Billy's behalf, having seen his essential innocence. Such an attempt to save Billy's life would be, the narrator points out, "an audacious transgression of the bounds of his function, one as exactly prescribed to him by military law as that of a boatswain or any other naval officer." The chaplain knows he must not step outside his realm of duties

John Claggart

John Claggart, the master-at-arms on the *Bellipotent,* is a difficult character to grasp, even for the narrator: "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it." Claggart's essential nature eludes not only the narrator and Billy Budd but also the perceptive Captain Vere; in fact, the only character who seems to understand Claggart and his motives is the

wise yet taciturn Dansker. Claggart in turn is "perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd," and ironically, Billy's goodness is what drives Claggart to destroy him.

Claggart is portrayed as being different from the other men on the *Bellipotent,* His physical description emphasizes his pallor, unusual among sailors and hinting of "something defective or abnormal." His background is mysterious, and he seems somehow foreign: "It might be that he was an Englishman; and yet there lurked a bit of accent in his speech suggesting that possibly he was not such by birth " He is not popular among the ship's crew, but "no man holding his office in a man-of-war can ever hope to be popular with the crew."

Having set Claggart up as an outsider on board the *Bellipotent,* the narrator goes on to establish Claggart[1] s evil nature, which the narrator says is innate in him. Essentially envious of Billy's "significant personal beauty," Claggart is disdainful of Billy's simple innocence, and goaded by it: "to be nothing more than innocent!" Claggart's deep envy of Billy grows out of his sense that Claggart possesses "no power to annul the elemental evil in him[self], though readily enough he could hide it, apprehending the good but powerless to be it." The narrator refers to Claggart's "monomania," or obsession, which is "covered over by his self-contained and rational demeanor"; this controlled surface is what Billy sees and perceives to be friendliness towards him. Billy is incapable of comprehending how and why Claggart is against him, and when Claggart moves in for the kill, accusing Billy of mutiny, Billy is unable to defend himself, helpless in the face of Claggart's depravity.

The Dansker

Billy's confidant, the Dansker, is a man of few words, a navy veteran with a "wizened face" to whom Billy goes "for wise counsel" The Dansker, who dubs Billy "Baby Budd," tells Billy that Claggart is "down on" him Billy cannot understand what the Dansker means; his innocence contrasts with his old friend's "pithy guarded cynicism " In spite of his wisdom, the Dansker chooses neither to interfere in Billy's business nor to give advice to the young sailor. The narrator attributes the Dansker's refusal to get involved to his experience with the world

The Drumhead Court

Comprised of the *Bellipoten't s* first lieutenant, captain of marines, and sailing master, the reluctant drumhead court has no real choice but to convict Billy Budd and sentence him to death. In spite of their sympathy for Billy and their disbelief that he could be capable of mutinous plotting, as Claggart had insisted, the members of the court are obligated to support the King's law. Captain Vere senses the court's hesitancy to convict Billy and reminds them of their military obligation and corresponding lack of free will, and they decide Billy's fate accordingly.

The Foretopman

See Billy Budd

Captain Graveling

Commander of the merchant ship *Rights-of-Man,* Captain Graveling tells Lieutenant Ratcliffe about Billy's calming influence on the men on board his ship and laments, "you are going to take away the jewel of 'em, you are going to take away my peacemaker!" The captain is "a respectable man" who takes "to heart those serious responsibilities not so heavily borne by some shipmasters." He is disheartened to think of how his ship had been "a rat-pit of quarrels" before Billy came aboard, as he expects it to return to that state after Billy leaves.

The Handsome Sailor

See Billy Budd

Jemmy Legs

See John Claggart

The Master-at-Arms

See John Claggart

The Old Merlin

See The Dansker

The Purser

The purser confronts the surgeon several days after Billy's execution, asking the doctor why Billy had been so still during his hanging. The surgeon admits that "the absence of spasmodic movement" in Billy during the hanging "was phenomenal" in the sense that such spasms are normal and the absence of them in Billy is inexplicable. The purser wants the surgeon to concede that Billy was able, through his own will power, to remain still at the moment of hanging, but the surgeon refuses to agree. The conversation between the purser and the surgeon suggests that there was something superhuman about Billy.

Lieutenant Ratcliffe

Ratchffe is the "burly and bluff' lieutenant of the H.M.S. *Bellipotent,* the British warship whose crew Billy is compelled to join. Lieutenant Ratcliffe, looking for men to join his ship's crew, quickly chooses Billy when he sees him aboard the *Rights-of-Man* and then goes to help himself to Captain Graveling's spirit locker without an invitation from the captain. Ratcliffe is unsympathetic to Captain Graveling's dejection over losing Billy.

The Red Whiskers

When Billy is a newcomer on the *Rights-of-Man,* the fellow known as the Red Whiskers picks a fight with Billy, perhaps out of envy over Billy's popularity, and Billy gives "the burly fool a terrible drubbing." The incident serves as foreshadowing to Billy's later striking of Claggart.

The Surgeon

The surgeon is the *Bellipotent's* doctor, "a self-poised character of that grave sense and experience that hardly anything could take him aback," and yet, when he examines Claggart and finds him dead, the surgeon is shocked. When Captain Vere immediately declares that Billy Budd must hang for killing Claggart, the surgeon thinks Vere is not in his right mind, and yet, he knows that to resist his captain "would be mutiny." So, out of duty, the surgeon carries out Captain Vere's orders.

Captain Vere

Noble, intellectual Captain Vere commands the *Bellipotent* and is an "austere devotee of military duty." He is, ultimately, responsible for Billy Budd's execution, as he instructs the drumhead court trying Billy's case in their responsibility to "adhere to ... and administer" the law, whether they agree with it or not. Respected by his crew, although seen by some as a martinet, Captain Vere is "an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline"; he believes that duty to the King comes before all else.

Captain Vere is an aristocrat, both by birth and in temperament, and his finely tuned "moral quality" enables him to be, "in earnest encounter with a fellow man, a veritable touchstone of that man's essential nature." The fact that Vere is puzzled by John Claggart and doubts his charges against Billy suggests that the events that follow Claggart's accusation will not be ordinary. Upon perceiving that Claggart is dead at Billy's hand, Captain Vere is transformed: "The father in him, manifested toward Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian." The military relation overrides the emotional relation between Billy and Vere. When Vere speaks to the members of the drumhead court about the decision they must make regarding Billy's punishment, he tells them they are not "natural free agents" but officers of the King.

Setting up the tension between emotion and intellect, Vere tells the officers, "let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool"; in other words, they should not be swayed by emotion in Billy's case, hard as that may be. In spite of Captain Vere's words about military duty, his dying words, not long after Billy's execution, are "Billy Budd, Billy Budd," so it seems clear that Billy's fate has left its impression on the captain's heart.

Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere

See Captain Vere

Starry Vere

See Captain Vere

Themes

Duty and Conscience

Captain Vere's dilemma□whether to convict Billy and hang him in spite of his sense that the young sailor is innocent□arises from Vere's very nature. Captain Vere is characterized throughout *Billy Budd* as a man who heeds his duty. Even before Captain Vere appears, a description of the captain by minor character Captain Graveling of the *Rights-of-Man* anticipates the more central captain's problem: "His duty he always faithfully did; but duty is sometimes a dry obligation " The "dry-ness" of duty is in its disconnection from feeling or intuition: duty is intellectual rather than emotional. And Captain Vere is described as possessing "a marked leaning toward everything intellectual," and "never tolerating an infraction of discipline." He adheres to the law and expects his men to do so as well.

Captain Vere's nickname, "Starry Vere," comes from a poem by Andrew Marvell, in which allusion is made to the "discipline severe" of a figure called "starry Vere," actually an ancestor of the captain. These early references to Captain Vere's rigidness concerning law and duty create a character who later in the novel must face a moral dilemma and choose between his duty and his conscience. When Claggart comes to Vere with his accusation against Billy, Vere is wary of the strange officer's manner and doubts that Billy Budd could be involved in such a plot as Claggart implies. Yet Vere knows he must question Billy; this is the proper way to handle such an allegation. When Billy strikes Claggart, killing him, Vere reacts in "an excited manner [such as the surgeon] had never before observed in the *Bellipotent' s* captain." In this situation, Vere's duty is made unclear by his emotional response to "so strange and extraordinary a tragedy." Yet he immediately calls the drumhead court, leaving the surgeon to think that the captain has perhaps come "unhinged."

The members of the drumhead court, believing in Billy's innocence, are pulled by their conscience to vote to "convict and yet mitigate the penalty," but Captain Vere stands fast by his duty and reminds the court that they should not "Let warm hearts betray heads that should be cool." Billy's execution goes forward because of Captain Vere's intense focus on duty. As naval officers, he tells the court, "in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents." He goes on to ask them to "tell me whether or not, occupying the position we do, private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?" Essentially, the captain and his officers face a problem of whether to ignore their consciences, which speak strongly to them of Billy's innocence, or to follow their duty as officers in the King's navy and order Billy's death. The accusation of mutiny aside, the simple fact is that Billy, a foretopman, has struck and killed his superior, the master-at-arms. This fact, viewed objectively and according to the law, must result in execution of the sailor, regardless of his innocent nature. Captain Vere, at his own death, appears still to be haunted by his decision in favor of duty: his last words are "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."

Innocence

Billy Budd's innocence□"his blinder," according to the narrator□is his tragic flaw. His innocence is what makes him the Handsome Sailor□ it radiates from his laughing "welkin eyes" and makes him a peacemaker and a friend to all, drawing others to him. Yet aboard the *Bellipotent,* one of the men who is drawn to him is motivated by envy and malice: Claggart. Here, in his encounters with the scheming master-at-arms, is where Billy's innocence is his weakness. He cannot comprehend the evil in Claggart, nor can he grasp that it is directed at him.

A foundling with no knowledge of his parents, Billy is illiterate and has had little experience with the world, having spent much of his life on board ship. Billy is "little more than an upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company." Adamic innocence is the purest kind of innocence, and a comparison with Adam before the Fall implies a closeness to nature and an innocence that is untouched by even a suggestion of evil.

When Billy takes great care to keep his possessions in order and perform his duties correctly, he is puzzled when he finds "something amiss." When he consults the wise Dansker, Billy is even more perplexed when the latter implies that Claggart has had something to do with Billy's troubles. The Dansker's insistence that "Jemmy Legs is down on you" proves "incomprehensible to a novice, [and] disturbed Billy almost as much as the mystery for which he had sought explanation." Billy is fundamentally incapable of comprehending how or why someone could be out to get him. Not only is he young and inexperienced; Billy "had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad," which others with less innocent natures may possess, enabling them to understand evil without having to experience it.

Law and Nature

Captain Vere defines the theme of law vs. nature when he admonishes the drumhead court to follow their duty to the King rather than listening to their hearts. He asks the members of the court how they can sentence to death "a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?" When the court appears sympathetic to his question, he goes on, "I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature"? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents." Captain Vere's statement to the court highlights an opposition in the novel between human-made law and nature. Billy represents nature. The narrator calls him "a barbarian"; he "stands nearer to unadulterated Nature" than the other characters by virtue of his innocence. The manner in which Billy's case is handled represents the force of law upon nature: men who feel

that Billy is innocent know that they must follow the King's laws against their better judgment. This problem is at the heart of the novel.

Evil

John Claggart personifies evil in *Billy Budd.* The narrator, who admits to his own tendencies toward innocence, claims not to be able to grasp Claggart's character in full: "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it." Claggart is portrayed as mysterious and foreign. Little is known about him or his past. His complexion hints at "something defective or abnormal in the constitution or blood," and although he seems to have had an education, "Nothing is known of his former life." Claggart's characterization as dark and unknowable establishes a feeling of dread about him. Regarding the source of Claggart's evil, the narrator touches upon the question of whether one is born evil or learns to be so. In Claggart, he says, "the mania of an evil nature [was] not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books ... but born with him and innate, in short 'a depravity according to nature.'" Linked with such a nature is "an uncommon prudence ... for it has everything to hide." Claggart behaves courteously toward Billy, covering up his hatred and envy of the young sailor, his "monomania ... [was] covered over by his self-contained and rational demeanor." If Billy Budd is Adam before the Fall, Claggart represents the serpent who introduces the innocent man to pure evil.

Style

Point of View

The first-person narrator refers to himself as "I" and briefly talks about himself and his past experiences. He does not give his name and is not on board the *Bellipotent,* yet he speaks authoritatively about the events that take place there. The narrator has a limited omniscient point of view, which means that he is able to see nearly all of the novel's action, including some of the characters' thoughts. His admission of being unable to grasp Claggart's character - "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it" - is one example of the narrator's limited omniscience, but it also contributes to the novel's overall depiction of Claggart's strangeness and foreignness.

The narrator tells of an experience he had as a young man, when "an honest scholar, my senior"

spoke to him about a fine point of human nature, and the narrator says of himself, "At the time, my inexperience was such that I did not quite see the drift of all this. It may be that I see it now." He tells this story about himself to illustrate his similarity to and thus his empathy for Billy Budd. The narrator's empathy helps to shape the story, as it enables him to understand Billy's innocence: his tragic flaw.

Setting

The setting of *Billy Budd* - a British warship in the summer of 1797 - is essential to the plot and meaning of the novel. The novel opens with the words, "In the time before steamships," immediately placing the action in a time relative to the development of naval technology: the reader envisions a ship with tall masts and huge sails, which is precisely where the novel's action is to occur. A few paragraphs later, the narrator introduces Billy Budd as a character and specifically identifies him as "a foretopman of the British fleet toward the close of the last decade of the eighteenth century."

The narrator's specificity about time and place sets the stage for what is to come. In chapter 3, the historic context for the novel's action is introduced: just prior to the novel's fictional events, which are set in "the summer of 1797," actual mutinies had taken place in the British navy in April and May of that same year. The mutinies at Spithead and the Nore still resonate on board the fictional *Bellipotent,* whose name means "strong in war." The *Bel-Hpotent's* sailors and officers continue to feel the tension from the two great mutinies. "Discontent foreran the Two Mutinies, and more or less it lurkingly survived them Hence it was not unreasonable to apprehend some return of trouble." Melville uses this atmosphere of tension as background for his novel in order to create a sense of mutiny in the air, a weakening of trust between sailors and their commanders. He points out that "for a time [following the Two Mutinies], on more than one quarter-deck, anxiety did exist. At sea, precautionary vigilance was strained against relapse. At

short notice an engagement might come on." An accusation against the innocent Billy Budd set at a different time, when the possibility of mutiny does not seem so palpable, might not end in tragedy. The narrator declares that "the unhappy event which has been narrated could not have happened at a worse juncture."

The shipboard setting, common among many of Melville's writings, presents a kind of microcosm of society, complete with hierarchies, laws and a wide variety of personalities and backgrounds. Women are missing from this floating society, but in fact women would not have been part of the British navy at the time during which this novel is set The narrator remarks that "the people of a great warship are .. like villagers, taking microscopic note of every outward movement or non-movement going on." Such seemingly small incidents as Billy spilling his soup in the mess or the afterguardsman coming to speak to Billy at night take on a larger significance because everyone notices these moments and speculates about them, perhaps allowing them to mean more than they do.

Foreshadowing

Throughout *Billy Budd,* Melville makes use of foreshadowing - suggesting events that are to come - which gives the novel's events a kind of doomed, fated quality. Billy's initial description as "welkin-eyed" - his eyes are the color of the skies - identifies him with the heavens, suggesting his goodness but also suggesting that he will soon become a part of the celestial sphere. When, at the beginning of the novel, Captain Graveling relates the story of Billy sulking the Red Whiskers out of anger, the incident sounds out of character for Billy. However, later on, when Billy strikes Claggart, killing him, the earlier incident reverberates. When Billy witnesses a fellow sailor being whipped as punishment for failing to do his duty, he is "horrified [and] resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit verbal reproof." Yet later, he himself is subjected to a punishment worse than whipping, and ironically his punishment comes about due to circumstances almost beyond his control Melville's use of foreshadowing is effective in *Billy Budd* because it heightens the novel's irony and contributes to its tale of the ill-fated innocent.

Historical Context

The Royal Navy in the Late Eighteenth Century

Between 1794 and 1797, the number of seamen and marines serving in the British navy jumped from 85,000 to 120,000. England was at war with France at this time, and the navy's need for manpower was immense. Most of the men in the British naval service had not chosen to be there. While some men did join the navy, sailors could also simply be taken off merchant ships by a warship's officer, as happens to Billy Budd. The sailors from merchant ships were valued for their sailing experience, and "topmen" such as Billy - those who could work up in the riggings - were especially useful.

Some men were "impressed" into naval service: these were the able-bodied men who could not be convinced to join the navy, so they had to be "pressed," or forced, to join, often through brutal means. Impressed men often resented their circumstances, but they had no choice but to stay aboard the warships, facing punishment if they shirked their imposed duty. When the afterguards-man comes to Billy to try to draw Billy into his mysterious plot, he first attempts to establish a bond with Billy regarding the way they were each brought onto the ship: "You were impressed, weren't you? ... Well, so was 1 ... We are not the only impressed ones. Billy. There's a gang of us," The context of this encounter is the tradition of impressment into the British navy and the resulting resentment, which has the potential to flower into mutiny.

Once on board the warships, sailors did not enjoy particularly healthful living conditions. A 74-gun ship, such as the *Bellipotent,* would have carried over 700 men, so quarters were crowded. Scurvy, a disease brought on by a lack of vitamin C, struck many sailors. In 1797, a British sailor could expect to eat salt beef and pork, oatmeal, cheese, bread, occasional fresh vegetables and assorted other foodstuffs. While a ship was at sea, the food often went bad: meat would decay, water would spoil, and the bread and tlour would be invaded by mice, rats, weevils and other vermin. Officers and captains enjoyed a higher quality of food and food preparation than the sailors did, often supplementing their allotments of food with food they purchased themselves.

Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore

Chapter 3 of J5///.V *Budd* introduces the facts of the 1797 mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. two **crucial** events that occurred in the British navy during the Napoleonic wars. Spithead is a strait of the English Channel, located in the south of England between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight; the Nore is a sandbank at the mouth of the Thames River in England, where the Thames enters the North Sea.

In 1797, Britain was at war with France, and the British navy had had to expand rapidly to fill the need for manpower on warships. However, many of the men who entered the navy at this time did not do so voluntarily, and conditions on board the naval ships left

much to be desired. The food was poor, the pay was paltry, medical treatment was **substandard,** and sailors were flogged for misconduct. Such circumstances contributed to a buildup of sailors' resentments. In April, when the commander of the Channel fleet's flagship, the *Queen Charlotte,* rejected the crew's demands to move the ship out to sea, the *Queen Charlotte's* crew spurred other ships in the fleet to join them in protest. The mutineers presented a petition to the House of Commons, who in turn met some of the demands of the petitioners. The promises made to the mutineers included better pay. removal of some of the harshest officers in the fleet, and pardons for those involved in the mutiny. The mutineers had succeeded in securing some improvements in their lot.

The April mutiny at Spithead soon extended to include the North Sea fleet, which was anchored at the Nore. The mutineers at the Nore were not as readily satisfied as their counterparts at Spithead: when the government offered concessions to the protesters at the Nore. they were reluctant to accept. An ex-midshipman, Richard Parker, convinced his fellow mutineers that they should not accept the government's terms immediately but should hold out for more. The mutiny put Britain into danger for a time, as the Dutch - allies of France - nearly were able to invade England while the mutineers remained inactive.

In speaking to the members of the drumhead court, Captain Vere connects the mutinies at Spit-head and the Nore to the events of *Billy Budd:* "You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? They know the well-founded alarm - the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them." In this atmosphere of tension over the potential power struggle between captains and their crews, Captain Vere must decide how to handle Billy's impulsive killing of his superior.

Mutiny on Board the Somers, 1842

Melville's narrator relates at the end of chapter 21 a connection between Billy's case and an incident aboard the U.S. brig *Somers* in 1842. This historic incident aboard the *Somers,* reports the narrator, culminated in "the execution at sea of a midshipman and two sailors as mutineers designing the seizure of the brig." The events on board the *Somers* and those on the *Bellipotent* are, he admits, "different from" each other, and yet "the urgency felt [by the officers deciding each case], well-warranted or otherwise, was much the same."

Melville's favorite older cousin when he was a child was Guert Gansevoort, who happened to be the first lieutenant of the *Somers.* When the three young sailors on board the *Somers* were suspected of planning a mutiny, Gansevoort had been among those officers called to advise the ship's captain, Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, as Mackenzie tried to decide the young men's fate. With no trial and no chance to defend themselves, the three sailors - one of whom, Philip Spencer, was the son of the U.S. secretary of war - were pronounced guilty and hanged from the ship's yardarm. Mackenzie was later tried for murder.

Critical Overview

Critical treatments of *Billy Budd* and of Melville abound, which is an irony given the origins of the novel. When Melville died in 1891, he left behind the manuscript for *Billy Budd,* which would not be discovered among his papers for another thirty years. At the time of Melville's death, his reputation as a literary talent had faded, but a few obituary notices did take note of Melville's earlier success and fame. Some of what was written about Melville immediately following his death had a regretful tone, as if his slip into obscurity had constituted a loss for American letters. An obituary in the *New York Times,* alluding to Melville's past fame, remarked that "this speedy oblivion by which a once famous man so long survived his fame is almost unique, and it is not easily explicable." The obituary went on to wonder at "why [Melville's books] are read and talked about no longer. The total eclipse now of what was then a literary luminary seems like a wanton caprice of fame." However, in *North American Review* in 1892, W. Clark Russell wrote, somewhat prophetically, that "Famous he was; now he is neglected; yet his name and works will not die. He is a great figure in shadow; but the shadow is not that of oblivion."

Russell's words truly were prophetic, as around the centennial anniversary of Melville's birthday in 1919 a movement known as the "Melville revival" began to develop. In *The Gazette of the Grolier Club,* William S. Reese, a collector of Melville's works, attributed the emergence of the revival to both Melville's centenary and also to "the beginning of a more disillusioned, deterministic, post-war age," whose readers would be more receptive to Melville's works than his own contemporaries had been. Reese noted that "Melville's centenary in 1919 had brought numerous literary notices, and ... In 1921 Raymond Weaver's biography, *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic,* came out, sparking further interest." *Billy Budd* was published for the first time in 1924 in a volume of Melville's work edited by Weaver, and thus, said Reese, "Melville was made generally accessible to readers."

In his 1921 biography of Melville, Weaver said that *Billy Budd* and other works in manuscript found after Melville's death were "not distinguished " Weaver added that *Billy Budd* "would seem to teach that though the wages of sin is death, that sinners and saints alike toil for a common hire." In the biography, Weaver also wrote that in *Billy Budd* Melville had lost "the brisk lucidity, the sparkle, the verve" of his earlier works and that "Only the disillusion abided with him to the last." Weaver seemed to contradict his 1921 statement in his introduction to 1928 *Shorter Novels of Herman Melville,* where he said that *Billy Budd* is "unmatched among Melville's works in lucidity and inward peace."

Weaver referred in his introduction to *Shorter Novels of Herman Melville* to the "state of the *Billy Budd* manuscript," proclaiming that "there can never appear a reprint that will be adequate to every ideal." The difficulty of assembling a definitive text plagued Melville critics for decades. Weaver, the first critic to lay eyes on the manuscript, said that it is "in certain parts a miracle of crabbedness: misspellings in the grand manner; scraps of paragraphs cut out and pasted over disemboweled sentences; words ambiguously begun ... variant readings, with no choice indicated among them. More

disheartening than this even, is one floating chapter .. with no numbering beyond the vague direction 'To be inserted.'" F. O. Matthiessen lauded Weaver's accomplishment in a footnote to his 1941 essay, *"Billy Budd, Foretopman",* because "The problem of editing Melville's one extant major manuscript was an exacting one" and thus critics should be "indebted to [Weaver's] enthusiastic and devoted pioneering for the first full-length study of Melville."

Another critic, Lewis Mumford, also found flaws in *Billy Budd;* he wrote in 1929 that what is missing in *Billy Budd* is "an independent and living creation." Mumford felt that while the story takes place on the sea, "the sea itself is missing, and even the principal characters are not primarily men: they are actors and symbols "

During the 1950s and 1960s, the body of Melville scholarship grew rapidly. Particularly after the 1962 publication of what was considered a definitive text of *Billy Budd* - edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. - scholars approached Melville's final novel with renewed interest. Hayford and Sealts wrote in their preface to this definitive edition that in "the first quarter century of criticism (1921-46) [there] seemed to be virtually a consensus, that the work constituted Melville's 'testament of acceptance.'" The editors added that in the 1950s this earlier consensus had been "flatly contradicted .. by those reading the novel as an ironic reiteration of all his lifelong quarrels and denials."

Peter Shaw, looking back in 1993 at the development of *Billy Budd* scholarship, noticed that "resistance readings eventually began to take on the coloration of 1960s radicalism. Stimulated by the concept of innocent youth punished by paternal authority, critics in the 1960s imagined Melville to be finding fault with 'the system,' by which they sometimes meant the law and sometimes 'the tragic guilt' of society itself.... It followed that the story meant not only radically to champion 'the people,' but also amounted to 'a call for rebellion.'" Shaw maintained that the "resistance/ironist reading continued to hold sway in the 1970s." In the 1980s, Shaw said, critics began to "routinely [argue] that Vere's application of the law is arbitrary and unnecessary, that it springs from twisted psychological motives, and that it reflects the inherent cruelty of his privileged class."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Esdale is a doctoral candidate in the Poetics Program at SUNY-Buffalo. In the following essay, he analyzes the self-conscious narration that exists in contrast to the apparent lack of self-consciousness in Billy Budd.

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* has produced an astonishing diversity of equally plausible interpretations. Most critics consider finally whether they approve or condemn Captain Vere' s decision to try and execute the sailor Billy Budd for the murder of the officer John Claggart. Invariably critics include in their analysis a statement made by the novel's narrator near the end that ostensibly apologizes for the meandering style and the unresolved questions: "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges." Following this proposition, the narrator concludes the history of Billy with three sequels - on the further adventures of the ship, the doomed captain, and the venerated spar from which Billy was hung - and a poem describing Billy's final moments in between life and death. The narrator includes as well a naval report that contradicts the version of events just given This naval report is anything but ragged. It justifies the execution of Billy in the strongest terms, claiming that he "vindictively stabbed" the honorable John Claggart.

Judging by this report alone, there is no doubt that Billy's death answers for the life he took. For the good of the English nation Billy is hung. But there is no judging anything alone; everything has a context that, if explored, will lead to the digressions and ragged edges that the narrator understands both as a burden on the mind that desires order, and as a liberation from closure. With the narrator, the reader will feel both disoriented and empowered - like the vertigo a person feels close to the edge of an abyss. Attention to all the facts puts the narrator in the impossible position of offering an endless series of contradictions, leaving readers uncertain about the intentions of the characters, and about the events themselves. Finally, the inclusion of other perspectives, like the naval report's, not only throws the truth of each account into doubt, but truth itself seems unreachable, a vanishing point on the horizon.

The novel - and language in general - structures itself through the use of binaries, such as child and adult, innocence and guilt, inner being and appearance, compassion and military or legal duty, the individual and the nation, sea and land Looking carefully at all the facts tends to blur the difference between these "opposites." In a digression on the line between sanity and insanity, for instance, the narrator asks, "Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other?" A question central to Melville's novel is where does the character "Billy Budd" end, and the character "John. Claggart" begin? The two men appear to be utterly distinct, the one intent on doing good and the other intent on doing evil, but also, at times, the one seems to have merged with the other.

When does the past end, and the present begin? When does the future begin? These questions haunt the narrator, and the history of Billy Budd becomes itself a questioning

of how history is written: the narration is self-conscious, which means that every general statement is qualified by a particular and contradictory statement, and that the lines among a character, the narrator, and the reader are blurred. The ragged edges of the story refer also to the rags or fragments of history the narrator finds and picks up as the story is written. An infinite number of sequels will still leave the story unfinished (as Melville left the manuscript unfinished at his death in 1891), and the narrator will consciously draw attention to this incompleteness. Critics have since 1924, when *Billy Budd* was first published, chosen either to write about the ragged edges, or write something like a naval report. Usually the critical imperative is to produce the latter; the chaos of events as they happen (in language) may be revealed, but everything will finally be put in order

Is it possible to reach truth, or is truth only that which those with authority agree to call "truth"? The latter happens in the case of Billy Budd: the officers sentence him, not according to his innocence of fomenting mutiny and committing murder, which they believe, but according to military law. History records that Billy is "guilty." The narrator claims to be telling the truth about events that happened in 1797, decades earlier than "now" (for the narrator). In so doing, the narrator questions the truth of the naval report made at the time, and suggests that only at an objective distance from the events, something Captain Vere and the officers judging Billy lacked, can history be accurately written. In other words, the truth about the past can only be told once the past has ended But is this possible? As readers (including the narrator) evaluate and judge the case, they realize that achieving objective distance is next to impossible. Perhaps the narrator tells us only what he wants to be true, slanting the facts to suit his purposes. And what is the reader's purpose?

This process of ordering chaos is habitual in us. Sailors live according to this habit. They need to trust in each other to survive. Any given ship was marked by diversity, "an assortment of tribes and complexions," so that the sailors, officers, and warship all appear together symbolically as a miniature nation. Some sailors chose to be on board, and some were forced (like Billy). Especially during war, when all differences among the enemy are ignored, any given nation glosses difference by transforming the characteristic habits of the people into instincts. "True" instinct, or that which defines the individual, are repressed. Common to all sailors was the "mechanism of discipline": "True martial discipline long continued," the narrator notes, "superinduces in average man a sort of impulse whose operation at the official word of command much resembles in its promptitude the effect of an instinct." In other words, what may appear natural or inherent in our behavior may be in fact merely habitual, in work on ship or on land For writers this means that the discipline of writing creates the illusion of order; and critics are false witnesses (like Claggart) to readers and to themselves if they attempt to propose a single, totalizing account.

The lack of a stable ground upon which to build an orderly interpretation of events is an effect of the story's setting - the ocean. The ocean is "inviolate Nature primeval," or chaos, and resistant to mapping The ocean and its effects on the story must have been implicit all along, but are not explicitly felt until well into the story, when Captain Vere meditates on the consequences of the two choices (between instinct and discipline)

facing himself and the three officers of the drumhead court - Vere "to-and-fro paced the cabin athwart; in the returning ascent to windward climbing the slant deck in the ship's lee roll, without knowing it symbolizing thus in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea."

Just as throughout the story the ship has been teetering back-and-forth, so too does the decision on Billy's fate move between innocent and guilty. This teetering might have continued indefinitely had Captain Vere not decided to prosecute Billy according to his deed (murder) and not his intention (defend himself). Vere eliminates ambiguity by executing Billy. Ultimately, the rights of the individual must be upheld in favor of the general "good." At the time, England was at war with France, and the navy had recently experienced two serious mutinies. "War looks but to the frontage, the appearance," Vere says, himself at war with indecision. Vere argues that the judgment must be made as if they were on (stable) land. He puts the ship back on even keel.

Naval battles are more explicitly described once we "sail away" from Billy's body on the surface of the ocean Most striking in the sequels is the return to land - a return also to the beginning of the story, which opens on the border between land and ocean: "In the time before steamships, or then more frequently than now, a stroller along the docks of any considerable seaport would occasionally have his attention arrested by a group of bronzed mariners, man-of-war's men or merchant sailors in holiday attire, ashore on liberty." There are at least four liminal spaces - or, as in the story, those "deadly spaces between" two opposites - that affect the mood of indecisiveness, two of which are m this first sentence: the time or history that has passed between 1797 and "now"; and the dock or shore. The other two are the ocean surface, and the forehead of the human body.

Steamships are less determined by the arbitrary forces of nature than those powered by wind and sail, which implies that as time has proceeded, the forces (or instincts) themselves have not changed, but we have become further civilized or buffered from their strength and effects. Civilization, the narrator says, "folds itself in the mantle of respectability." Notice also that sailors ashore or along a dock are in the space between water and land, and are at "liberty." This particular reference to liberty or freedom suggests that on either side of a "dock space" people are subject to the "mechanisms of discipline." In a dock space or in the ocean, however, the diversity of forces is at play. An ocean surface can appear calm and serene, yet the struggle for life continues underneath between, simply enough, big and small fish.

Finally, in this short list of liminal spaces, the forehead marks the point between inside and outside, between body and mind. The forehead is the particular place Billy strikes on Claggart's body. Before this scene occurs, the narrator makes an odd comparison which helps explain the surprising effectiveness of the blow: "consciences are as unlike as foreheads." Why does Billy strike Claggart's forehead'? Perhaps he did so because Claggart's "brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect." Phrenology claims that much about a person's character is revealed in the shape of the head. Billy was fooled by the humane aspect of Claggart's face (an ocean surface), never believing that Claggart harbored malicious intentions; but Billy seems

also to know, unconsciously perhaps, that staking Claggart's (guilty) "conscience" would kill him. Billy stakes what was individual to Claggart. Had Billy struck elsewhere, Claggart probably would have lived. How did he locate Claggart's weak spot? What does Billy know about himself and Claggart?

Whether Billy lacks self-consciousness or comprehends the destructiveness in others and in himself is finally the question on which the novel turns. Billy Budd may well represent the complex tensions in American literature as a whole. Under pressure, Billy stutters: with "sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse" - silence Poet and critic Susan Howe has said in *The Birth-mark. Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History,* that it is "the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams."

Set in the Mediterranean Ocean on an English boat during a war with France, Billy is yet distinctly American. Given the chance to formulate dreams and ideals, America and "Billy Budd, the Handsome Sailor" (both are born in 1776) fail to realize them. Speculations on malice or difference "into which [Billy] was led were so disturbingly alien to him that he did his best to smother them," and so does America (consider in its history up to 1891 the silence on the slaughter of the natives as well as slavery, and that the majority of the population - including all women - do not have the right to vote, and are, in other words, unable to speak). Billy says at his trial, "Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him" (consider the violence used in the making of history).

Melville stopped writing fiction for almost thirty years because his books received an almost uniformly hostile response. Out of this silence, *Billy Budd* surfaced and critiques an American reading public understood to be functionally illiterate. Billy is a big dumb kid, who certainly does not deserve to die, as the story is told, but who is - Claggart was right - dangerous. Claggart accuses Billy of harboring plots that would disrupt civil order. This accusation brings Billy's unconscious anger and fear to light and results in the deadly blow. The anxiousness on board about mutiny was caused by the sailor revolts just a few months earlier at British naval bases. But older captains in the British navy would have remembered the American Revolution, a mutiny on a national scale, in which the sailors (the colonies) overthrew the captain (the King). Melville wonders how an illiterate nation, one unable to speak for itself without using violence, is to survive.

There exists in Billy a refusal to be self-conscious, just as there exists in him an inability to speak during crisis moments, when ambiguity surfaces. Billy cannot and will not speak. The narrator attempts to repair this defect by writing a self-conscious history. *Billy Budd* represents the wildness of reading, and what is repressed during reading and interpreting. From the start, and at the end, both narrator and reader rock between writing an orderly report, or a self-conscious essay that tests the ragged edges, the gaps, or stutters in fiction and in history - a "sounding of uncertainty."

Source: Logan Esdale, in an essay *fat Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Goldstein delves into the legal profession's view of Billy Budd.

It is a story of innocence and evil, of crime and punishment, of rationality and insanity, of motives tainted and pure, [n short, material that lawyers thrive on, and since it was published posthumously in 1924. *Billy Budd, Sailor* has gripped the collective imagination of the bar.

Lately, a cottage industry has grown up in legal circles on the interpretation of Herman Melville's novella. It is taught in courses in jurisprudence, and books and law journal articles delve into whether Billy Budd. the protagonist, was unjustly executed and whether the man who sent him to his death, Captain Starry Vere. was a jurisprudential hero or villain.

Last fall a two-day colloquium on the law and Billy Budd was held at the Washington and Lee School of Law in Lexington. Va. And last week 150 lawyers listened to a prominent judge and professor debate the novel's meaning at the New York City Bar Association.

The novel, said one panelist. Prof. Richard Weisberg of the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law. causes lawyers "to reflect constantly upon our own values".

While some lawyers have long written fiction and some writers have long been fascinated by lawyers, only recently have law and literature become a fashionable and respectable area of legal scholarship. Courses are now offered at the best law schools, legal periodicals are filled with articles exploring [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky. [Franz] Kafka and [Herman] Melville, and at summer retreats, judges are as likely to discuss [William] Shakespeare as Tom Wolfe.

"Literature enriches our understanding of law", said David Saxe, an acting Supreme Court justice in New York City.

In the novel. Billy Budd, a popular sailor, has been impressed into service on a British warship. Soon afterward a petty officer, John Claggart. falsely accuses Billy of being a mutineer. When confronting his accuser. Billy cannot speak. The captain comforts him, saying there is no need to hurry. But Billy strikes Claggart dead with a single blow. The captain convenes a court-martial, whose members are inclined to leniency until the captain intercedes. Within 24 hours, Billy is hanged.

Literary and legal critics have often viewed Captain Vere as an honorable man and able administrator who was forced to perform a distasteful task.

This view has been sharply challenged in lectures and articles by Professor Weisberg, who holds a doctorate in comparative literature as well as a law degree. He argued that the captain had acted improperly as witness, prosecutor, judge and executioner. In

calling for summary execution, the captain, according to the professor, misread applicable statutes and committed procedural errors.

The professor presented a detailed review of court-martial procedures in effect in the 18th century, when the story took place, and concluded. "From the legal point of view, there was no justification of what Vere did".

His interpretation was disputed by Judge Richard Posner, a Federal appeals judge in Chicago who is a prodigious writer on the side; 13 books and 130 law review articles bear his name. The judge chided the professor for going beyond the text of the book for his evidence. Melville, he said, was "not writing the story for people expected to do legal research."

For Judge Posner, Vere was merely fulfilling his obligation. "We cannot bring a 1980's view of capital punishment to the story", Judge Posner said. "It was utterly routine in the 18th century".

Source: Tom Goldstein, "Once Again, *Billy Budd* Stands Trial," in *The New York Times,* June 10, 1988, p. 15, p B9.

Critical Essay #3

In the essay below, Reich provides a detailed look at justice as portrayed in Billy Budd, *arguing that human law must address a man's actions as seen objectively within his situation.*

To read *Billy Budd* is to feel an intense and indelible sense of helplessness and agony. A youthful sailor, loved by his shipmates for his natural goodness, is put to death for the sake of seemingly formalistic, insensate law. In this final work of Melville's, law and society are portrayed in fundamental opposition to natural man.

The confrontation takes place in a stark and somber shipboard drama. Billy, the Handsome Sailor, is falsely and maliciously accused of mutiny by Claggart, the master-at-arms. Momentarily losing the power of speech while trying to answer, Billy strikes out at Claggart, and the blow kills. Captain Vere, who witnesses the act and must judge it, is caught in a "moral dilemma involving aught of the tragic." Knowing full well Billy's goodness, and that he did not intend to kill, Vere sees no choice but to apply the inflexible law of a military ship in time of war. Billy is hanged.

The problem of *Billy Budd* has produced much argument. Some critics have considered it Melville's "testament of acceptance," a peaceful, resigned coming-into-port after a stormy lifetime. Some have thought that Billy, though dead, triumphs because his sacrifice restores goodness to the world. Others have found the novel a bitter and ironic criticism of society. Most recently and persuasively, it has been called a Sophoclean tragedy, a contemplation of life's warring values. All of these views have merit. But there is still more to be seen in *Billy Budd.*

Melville's last book seems clearly to be different from his earlier works. It is true that Billy and Claggert are archetypal Melville figures. But in *Billy Budd* neither of these characters is developed or explained; each remains static. Instead, the focus is upon a new kind of character - the civilized, intellectual Captain Vere. He is the only character whose feelings we are permitted to see, and his is the only consciousness which seems to grow during the action In addition, the book's focus is upon a new situation: not the old clash of good and evil, but an encounter of these natural forces, on the one hand, with society and law on the other. Significantly, Vere, and the dilemma of this encounter, were the last elements to be added when Melville was writing, as if he had started out to repeat an old drama but ended up with something new and unexpected. *Billy Budd* is also different in that the central theme is presented through the medium of a problem in law. And "law" is used not merely in the general sense of order as opposed to chaos. Instead we are given a carefully defined issue. This issue receives an extraordinarily full treatment which, together with its crucial position in the story, makes it the major focus of action and conflict.

In approaching *Billy Budd* almost all critics, whatever their ultimate conclusions, have started with the assumption that Billy is innocent, and that the issue is an encounter between innocence and formalistic society. But to say that Billy is innocent is a

misleading start, for it invites a basic confusion and oversimplification. By what standard is he innocent? Is it by law deriving from nature, from God, or from man? And to what is the concept of innocence applied - to Billy's act or to Billy himself? Billy is innocent in that he lacks experience, like Adam before the Fall, but he is not necessarily innocent in that he is not guilty of a crime. The problem of justice in the book is a profoundly difficult one; its possibilities are far richer than is generally recognized. In turn, such recognition affects the reader's view of Vere and, ultimately, the understanding of the novel as a whole.

There are at least three basic issues in *Billy Budd.* First, how and by what standards should Billy, or Billy's act, be judged? ...

In 1884, close to the time when Melville wrote *Billy Budd,* there came before the courts of England in a great and famous case a true-life sea tragedy, one which also presented a dilemma for the law. Three English seamen, Dudley, Stephens, and Brooks, and Richard Parker, an English boy of seventeen or eighteen, were cast away in an open boat 1600 miles from the Cape of Good Hope. For eighteen days they drifted, with no fresh water except occasional ram caught in their oilskin capes, and nothing to eat but two tins of turnips and a small turtle which they caught and which was entirely consumed by the twelfth day. On the eighteenth day, when they had been seven days without food and five without water, Dudley and Stephens, spoke of their having families, and resolved, if no help arrived by the next day, to kill the boy, who was lying helpless and near death in the bottom of the boat On the twentieth day, no ship appearing, Dudley and Stephens, offering a prayer for God's forgiveness, told the boy his time was come, and put a knife into his throat, and the three men fed upon his body and blood. On the fourth day after the act they were rescued, in the lowest state of prostration. The three survivors were carried to Falmouth, and Dudley and Stephens were committed for trial on a charge of murder.

The decision of the case was rendered, for the Queen's Bench, by the Chief Justice of England, Lord Coleridge. It had been found that at the time of the killing there was no reasonable prospect of help, that had the men not fed upon the boy they would probably all have died before the rescue, and that the boy would probably have died first. In these circumstances, it was argued, the killing was not murder. In an elaborate and scholarly opinion which drew on the views of philosophers and legal authorities from the time of Henry III forward, Lord Coleridge rejected this defense. He found that no writer except one considered necessity a justification for killing, except in the case of self-defense, which differs because there it is the victim, and not some external element, who actively threatens the killer's life. The defense of necessity must be rejected, said the Lord Chief Justice, because law cannot follow nature's principle of self-preservation. "Though law and morality are not the same, and many things may be immoral which are not necessarily illegal, yet the absolute divorce of law from morality would be of fatal consequence...." Contrasting that morality with the law of nature, Lord Coleridge said:

To preserve one's life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be the plainest and highest duty to sacrifice it War is full of instances in which it is man's duty not to live, but to die The duty, in case of a shipwreck, of a captain to his crew, of the crew to the

passengers, of soldiers to women and children, as in the noble case of the *Birkenhead,* these duties impose on men the moral necessity, not of the preservation, but of the sacrifice of their lives for others, from which many country, least of all, it is hoped, m England, will men ever shrink, as, indeed, they have not shrunk It is not needful to point out the awful danger of admitting the principle which has been contended for Who is to be the judge of this sort of necessity'

By what measure is the comparative value of lives to be measured? It is to be strength, or intellect, or what' Such a principle once admitted might be made the legal cloak for unbridled passion and atrocious crime. There is no safe path for judges to tread but to ascertain the law to the best of their ability and to declare it according to their judgment, and if any case the law appears too severe on individuals, to leave it to the Sovereign to exercise that prerogative of mercy which the Constitution has entrusted to the hands fittest to dispense it

It must not be supposed that in refusing to admit temptation to be an excuse for crime it is forgotten how terrible the temptation was, how awful the suffering; how hard in such trials to keep the judgment straight and the conduct pure We are often compelled to set up standards we cannot reach ourselves, and to lay down rules which we could not ourselves satisfy But a man has no right to declare temptation to be an excuse, though he might himself have yielded to it, nor allow compassion for the criminal to change or weaken in any manner the legal definition of the crime.

Dudley and Stephens were sentenced to death. But the history does not end there. After an appeal for mercy, the Queen commuted their sentences to six months' imprisonment.

There are striking similarities between the history of Dudley and Stephens and the tale of *Billy Budd.* Billy, falsely accused before the Captain by Claggart, and unable to defend himself verbally because at the critical moment he cannot utter a word, responds to pure nature, and to the dictates of necessity. He is overwhelmed by circumstance, placed in the greatest extremity of his life. He stands "like one impaled and gagged," "straining forward in an agony ... to speak and defend himself" his face assumes "an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold." Suddenly he stakes a blow at the master-at-arms, and the blow kills. "I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow, God help me!" Billy testifies later.

Captain Vere renders his judgment in much the same words as Lord Coleridge. He says "In natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered?" Budd purposed neither mutiny nor homicide, Vere acknowledges. "And before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one that plea would largely extenuate. At the Last Assizes it shall acquit." But under the law, Billy's blow was a capital offense; the Mutiny Act made no exceptions for palliating circumstances. The officers' responsibility is to adhere to it and administer it. The exceptional in the matter moves the heart and the conscience, but it cannot move the upright judge.

In the discussion of the law that takes place aboard the *Bellipotent* among the members of the drumhead court, the first argument for Billy's innocence is based upon what is

natural in the circumstances. Billy's act took place under the most extreme provocation. And it is described as almost automatic or instinctual, the unbearable tension of Billy's violent thwarted efforts at utterance suddenly finding outlet in a blow. If Billy is innocent for these reasons, it must be because of what Captain Vere calls "natural justice." Such justice, so Vere implies, looks to circumstances like self-defense, extreme provocation, or dire necessity. Natural justice exonerates, presumably, when the crime was forced upon the killer; when he did not kill by his own free choice. Billy was overcome by forces beyond his control. From the moment he was taken off the merchant ship *Rights-of-Man* and impressed into the King's service, until on the last night he lay prone in irons between two cannon upon the deck, Billy was "as nipped in the vice of fate." At the crucial moment when he was beset by Clag-gert's evil, society was not able to protect him; his separation from civilization is symbolized by the sea: in Vere's words, "the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval ... the element where we move and have our being as sailors." The mood of the drama is all inevitability; against the impersonal movement of events Billy is but "Baby Budd." No wonder Vere whispers "Fated boy, what have you done!"

Billy, moreover, is presented less as a rational being than as a child of Nature. Illiterate, un-self-conscious, "one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge," Billy was "little more than a sort of upright barbarian," one standing "nearer to unadulterate Nature." "Like the animals ... he was ... practically a fatalist." And although Claggart has the surface appearance of reason, he is as natural as Billy underneath. Like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights,* he personifies a nonhuman force. Although he has some very human qualities, the force that moves him is "Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature," "bom with him and innate." Like a storm or tidal wave, he represents "an unreciprocated malice." Billy's "mere aspect" calls up in Claggert "an antipathy spontaneous and profound." Thus their clash is as unavoidable as that of natural forces like fire and water.

The opinion of Lord Coleridge speaks to Billy's case as well as that of Dudley and Stephens. Like Billy, they found themselves in an extremity of circumstances, overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Like Billy, they were called upon to act in the isolated universe of the sea and a boat, far removed from the protective influence of civilization. Like Billy, they acted as natural men.

Indeed, if Billy is innocent, why not Claggert? Is it just to blame Claggert for evil that was not his choice but was innate and inborn? His nature, "for which the Creator alone is responsible," must "act out to the end the part allotted to it." His antipathy was no more within his control than Billy's fist was under Billy's control. Billy's very existence and nearness was an excruciating, unbearable provocation to Claggart, as D. H. Lawrence's young soldier is to his superior in *The Prussion Officer.* In Lawrence's story, a striking parallel to the Claggart-Billy aspect of *Billy Budd,* a cold and haughty officer is assigned a youthful orderly, "an unhampered young animal" whose presence was "like a warm flame upon the older man's tense, rigid body." Something about the boy so disturbs and enrages the officer that he goads and torments the orderly until the boy, seized by a flaming, nearly suffocating instinct, breaks the officer's neck with his bare hands, then dazedly awaits his own death. In yielding to a similar provocation Claggart only shows

the same inability to control his nature that Billy and, for that matter, Dudley and Stephens (who could not control the primal drive of hunger) have shown.

Nature contains both Billy's goodness and Claggert's evil. But in times of stress and extremity, the law of nature offers no support to goodness, and no check to evil. It interposes no objection when Dudley and Stephens kill the weak boy. And it allows Billy to kill a weaker man who was not immediately threatening his life. Human law must set a higher standard. To do so, it must look beyond the immediate theater of action. Harsh though this may be, we must be judged by a universe wider than the one in which our actions are played out. The actions of Dudley and Stephens must be judged from England, and not from within the narrow universe of a lifeboat in the open sea. The act of Billy must be judged from outside his desperate "struggle against suffocation," and from beyond "the inner life of one particular ship."

In addition, man's law must posit a free will, an ability to choose. Not because free will always exists - or ever exists - but because law must rest on the assumption that man can control his own conduct, so that he may strive to raise himself above his natural state. Even psychiatry and psychoanalysis, the sciences which most strongly support a deterministic view of human nature, insist that an area of choice exists, and the patient can change his course. Even the psychotic makes some response to rules or law. Man must reject the concept of determinism if he is to live in and adapt to the society of others, whether that society is our complex twentieth-century world or the primitive grouping of four beings in an open boat. Not only Vere and Coleridge, but all men, wear the buttons of the King.

Natural justice, as the drumhead court sees it, has a second aspect; the guilt or innocence of the mind. Billy did not intend to kill. He testifies, "there was no malice between us .. I am sorry that he is dead. I did not mean to kill him." Moreover, Billy's whole character shows an innocent mind. The sailors all loved him. His virtues were "pristine and unadulterated He was the Handsome Sailor, blessed with strength and beauty, of a lineage "favored by Love and the Graces," with a moral nature not "out of keeping with the physical make," "happily endowed with the gaiety of high health, youth, and a free heart." Vere calls him "a fellow creature innocent before God." The chaplain recognizes "the young sailor's essential innocence." Even Claggart feels that Billy's nature "its simplicity never willed malice."

Of course Billy cannot escape all responsibility for the consequences of his blow. He intended to hit Claggart, although possibly not full on the forehead. Intending the blow, Billy took upon himself the responsibility for the possible consequences. But should not his responsibility be limited because this was an unintended killing? At first thought, we agree. The law does not punish children; it does not punish the insane An accidental killing is not murder. The law recognizes the difference between premeditated killing and killing in hot blood, or by provocation, or in fear. Should not Billy's innocent mind be considered in extenuation? But although modern law is more flexible than the Mutiny Act, its basic approach is similar; primarily it judges the action and not the man or his state of mind. The law stands at a distance from the crime and the criminal, and judges

"objectively." And while such an approach may not satisfy the demands of divine justice, it is the only possible basis for human law. Justice Holmes, in *The Common Law,* says:

When we are dealing with that part of the law which aims more directly than any other at establishing standards of conduct, we should expect there more than elsewhere to find that the tests of liability are external, and independent of the degree of evil in the particular person's motives or intentions The conclusion follows directly from the nature of the standards to which conformity is required These are not only external, as was shown above, but they are of general application. They do not merely require that every man should get as near as he can to the best conduct possible for him. They require him at his own peril to come up to a certain height. They take no account of incapacities, unless the weakness is so marked as to fall into well-known exceptions, such as infancy or madness They assume that every man is as able as every other to behave as they command. If they fall on any one class harder than on another, it is on the weakest For it is precisely to those who are most likely to err by temperament, ignorance or folly, that the threats of the law are the most dangerous.

The problem of subjectivity is shown by the case of Dudley and Stephens. They were, for aught that appears, the most upright and God-fearing of men, perhaps even the real-life equivalents of Billy. Possibly their motives were wholly altruistic. Maybe they would actually have preferred death to eating the flesh of the boy, but felt responsibility to wives and children. The necessity for their killing was far greater than the need which directed Billy's arm. Perhaps they, too, were men incapable of malice.

The divine law of the Last Assizes, a law that judges the totality of man, is beyond human ability to administer; more, it is beyond human ability to *imagine.* Such justice must ever remain unknowable to humans. When Claggart, the lying Ananias, is killed, Vere exclaims "Struck dead by an angel of God' Yet the angel must hang!" But this is no paradox. Men cannot enforce divine judgments.

Human law must accept the fact that the mind is largely unknowable, that motives can seldom be ascertained. How are we to judge a man who kills because he *thought* the other was threatening his life, or because he *thought* the other had killed his child, or because he *thought* God had commanded him to do the act"? In such cases, the law ordinarily resorts to some objective test of the supposed state of mind. In a case of self-defense, we do not simply ask the killer what he thought at the time. We seek to determine on an objective basis whether the victim was actually approaching with a weapon in circumstances where the killer had no reasonable opportunity to escape Provocation must likewise be determined not only by reference to the state of mind of the person provoked (he may be hypersensitive, or even paranoid) but by an objective look at the nature of the provocation. To some extent all law, and even more so the military law, "looks but to the frontage, the appearance." In sum, human law looks primarily to men's actions, the one objective reality that is presented. Human law says that men are *defined* by their acts they are the sum total of their actions, and no more.

In this light, the initial conflict in *Billy Budd* can be reassessed. Billy is not innocent in the sense in which that term is used in resolving issues of justice. Billy is innocent in what

he is, not what he does. The opposite of his Miltonic type of innocence is not guilt, but experience. The conflict is not a "catastrophe of innocence;" it is a conflict between society and Nature that contains - even in Billy's case - both good and evil. It is "catastrophe of Nature." His inability to adapt to society is the inability of nature to be civilized. Billy is incapable of acquiring experience. And the failing mat leads to his execution in his incapacity to use the civilized man's weapon of speech. In society, natural forces cannot fight out their battles; Billy cannot use his physical strength to strike back at Claggart. The novel, then is not an analysis of Billy or of Claggart. Instead, it asks the question *how did it fare* with Billy in the year of the Great Mutiny?

Source: Charles A Reich, "The Tragedy of Justice in *Billy Budd," Yale Review,* Vol. 56, 1967, pp. 368-89.

Adaptations

Billy Budd was adapted as a film in 1962 by Peter Ustinov, who directed, produced, and starred as Captain Vere in this version of Melville's novel. Terence Stamp, as Billy, won an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. Other actors who starred in the film include Robert Ryan and David McCallum. The film is in black and white and is available on VHS.

Benjamin Britten adapted *Billy Budd* as a four-act opera in 1951, with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier. A production of the opera is available on video, released in 1988, starring Thomas Allen as Billy, and with the English National Opera Orchestra and Chorus conducted by David Atherton and directed by Tim Albery.

Billy Budd is available on two audio cassettes, read by Simon Jones. The cassettes were released by Durkin Hayes Audio in 1987.

Louis 0. Coxe and Robert Chapman published *Billy Budd, A Play in Three Acts* in 1951 by Princeton University Press.

A documentary on the historical incident that inspired *Billy Budd, The Curse of the Somers: Billy Budd's Ghost Ship* (1996) is an award-winning film narrated by Peter Coyote. The film looks at the controversial Somers Mutiny Affair, which Melville mentions in *Billy Budd.* This case resulted in the hanging of midshipman Philip Spencer and the court-martial of Captain Alexander Slidell Mackenzie. The film also includes underwater footage of an exploration of the Somers wreck. Information on the Somers Documentary Film Project can be found on the Web site: http://www.lsomers.com/somers/film.htm.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Somers Mutiny Affair of 1842. Compare the events in that historical case to the events of *Billy Budd.* How did Melville depart from the events of the Somers case in his composition of *Billy Budd?* What events did he keep, and why?

Watch the video of the 1962 film adaption of *Billy Budd.* What aspects of Melville's novel do the filmmakers emphasize? What do you think of the way the film was cast□are the characters portrayed as you would have expected? What do you think of the musical score's contribution to the film's mood'?

The narrator refers to Claggart's attitude towards Billy as "monomania." What does he mean by this term" Is there an equivalent in modern psychological parlance[9] Research how a modern psychologist might describe or explain Claggart's feelings towards Billy.

Research the history of impressment into the British Royal Navy Why do you think Melville made impressment into naval service a part of Billy's character[9] How might an actual sailor in Billy' s time have felt about being impressed into service?

Compare and Contrast

1790s: Late eighteenth-century warships of the British navy are powered by sails. Seventy-four-gun ships - especially fast and easy to handle - are most common. Steam power is being explored as a means of ship propulsion.

1890s: The United States begins building a "new navy" in the 1880s: ironclad steam-powered ships with a variety of weapons on board.

1924: The Five-Power Naval Limitation Treaty, signed in 1922, restricts Allied countries from building new battleships until 1931 and orders that most battleships of outdated construction be destroyed. Naval aircraft technology is developed during this period.

Today: Nearly half of the U.S. Navy's warships are propelled by nuclear reactors, which allow the ships to travel at high speeds without the need for fuel oil.

1790s: During the American Revolution, capital punishment had come under fire in America as a deplorable institution from the reign of King George. By 1796, Melville's home state of New York has decreased the number of crimes punishable by death from thirteen to two - those being murder and treason.

1890s: In 1890, the New York Assembly passes a bill abolishing capital punishment, but the State Senate votes the bill down. In August of 1890, William Kemmler becomes the first victim of execution by electrocution, hanging having been deemed too barbaric.

1924: The infamous Leopold and Loeb murder case, in which teenagers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb are tried for brutally murdering fourteen-year-old Richard Franks, has many Americans demanding the death penalty for the defendants, who are found guilty of kidnapping and murder. The judge accepts renowned attorney Clarence Darrow's argument that Leopold and Loeb are insane and rejects the death penalty, instead sentencing them to life imprisonment at hard labor.

Today: The U S. Supreme Court abolished capital punishment in 1972 in *Furman v. Georgia,* but since that decision, rulings in other cases have chipped away at various aspects of the death penalty ruling, and executions continue to occur. In 1991, about 2,500 inmates were on death row. At the turn of the century, one debate over the death penalty focuses on whether lethal injection is more humane than the electric chair.

1790s: In a nation of immigrants, white European settlers view Native Americans as "the other," and as impediments to their possession of the vast American land In the South, African slaves are treated as property by their white slaveholders.

1890s: American nativists grow uneasy about the enormous influx of immigrants into the country. In 1880, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting for ten years the entrance of Chinese laborers into the United States. In 1892, Congress renews the act for another decade.

1924: Reflecting a national mood of anti-foreigner sentiment following World War I, the Immigration Act of 1924 establishes an annual quota for immigration into the United States.

Today: "Multiculturalism," a movement aimed at engendering respect for other cultures, is taught in American schools and is a force in the popular culture

What Do I Read Next?

"Young Goodman Brown," is a short story published in 1835 by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The character of Young Goodman Brown, an innocent, is tested by evil forces that are mysterious to him. He is nearly incapable of comprehending that the people he respects most might possess a capacity for evil. Melville was friends with Hawthorne and had the utmost respect and admiration for his work.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), considered by most critics to be his masterpiece, is, like *Billy Budd,* a tale of good and evil set against the stark setting of the sea. Captain Ahab, who obsessively seeks the white whale, Moby-Dick, is identified as a "monomaniac"; Claggart in *Billy Budd is* described as possessing a "monomania."

The Bounty Trilogy, a collection of three books by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, traces the historic mutiny aboard the H.MS. *Bounty* and its aftermath as experienced by the captain and crew. The first book in the trilogy, *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1932), is an account of the 1788 voyage of H.M.S. *Bounty,* during which Fletcher Christian committed mutiny against Captain Bligh. In *Men Against the Sea* (1934), Captain Bligh, along with the nineteen men who chose to remain loyal to him during the mutiny, travel 3,600 miles in an open boat that they had been set out in by the mutineers. *Pitcairn's Island* (1934) tells of how Christian, his fellow mutineers, and a few Tahitians end up on a forsaken island in the Pacific following the mutiny.

Melville's *Redburn* (1849) tells the story of an inexperienced yet proud young man who goes to sea and learns about the world through his difficulties with life at sea. While the innocent Redburn anticipates Billy Budd, the evil Jackson foretokens Claggart.

Further Study

Gail Coffler, "Classical Iconography in the Aesthetics of *Billy Budd, Sailor,"* in *Savage Eye - Melville and the Visual Arts,* edited by Christopher Sten, Kent State University Press, 1991, pp 257-76.

Coffler analyzes Melville's abiding interest in ancient Greek and Roman myth, law, and art. Billy Budd, the character, is a combination of Greek beauty and Roman strength.

Mervyn Cook and Philip Reed, editors, *Benjamin Britten. Billy Budd,* Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Cambridge University Press, 1993

A synopsis of Britten's opera, which is based on Melville's novel. In addition to the synopsis, the book includes an explanation of the opera's literary roots, a discussion of the librettist's and composer's work, and an interpretation of the music's tonal symbolism

Clark Davis, *After the Whale - Melville in the Wake of Moby-Dick,* University of Alabama Press, 1995

A book-length assessment of Melville's lesser-known writings that came after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. This book won the 1993 Elizabeth Agee Prize in American Literature.

Kieran Dolin, "Power, Chance and the Rule of Law - *Billy Budd, Sailor,"* in *Fiction and the Law: Legal Discourse in Victorian and Modernist Literature,* Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp 121-44.

Discusses *Billy Budd* as one of the first explorations of the connection between law and literature Dohn analyzes how "natural law," which involves ambiguities, was being increasingly replaced by "legal positivism," or a belief that law might be a precise science. Dohn argues that this shift in thinking is portrayed negatively in Melville's novel

Lawrence Douglas, "Discursive Limits Narrative and Judgement in Billy Budd," *Mosaic,* Vol. 27, No. 4, December, 1994, pp. 141-160.

According to Douglas, Melville's novel is one of the earliest dialogues between law and literature, which is useful to students of both disciplines since it explores crisis in the act of and the art of judgement

James Dugan, *The Great Mutiny,* Putnam's, 1965. This book discusses in detail the 1797 mutinies in the British Royal Navy at Spithead and the Nore, and the events leading up to these uprisings.

H Bruce Franklin, "Billy Budd and Capital Punishment A Tale of Three Centuries," *American Literature,* June, 1997, pp. 337-59.

Franklin examines the novel in the context of the contemporary (1880s) debate on capital punishment, a controversy particular to New York, where Melville lived at the time The debate considered which offenses, if any, should carry the death penalty, and the exceptions that should occur during war.

Leonard F. Guttridge, *Mutiny A History of Naval Insurrection,* United States Naval Institute, 1992.

Beginning with the infamous mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1787, this book traces the history of mutiny in the U S Navy as well as in other navies around the world, Guttridge dispels some of the myths of mutiny and shows how instances of mutiny have often grown out of individuals' reactions to specific historic circumstances.

Myra Jehlen, editor, *Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice Hall, 1994.

This excellent critical anthology collects essays written in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, on all of Melville's work

Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of 'Billy Budd,'" *Studies in Romanticism,* Winter, 1979, pp 567-99.

Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis both of the criticism prior to 1979 and the novel's ambiguities.

Charles Larson, "Melville's Marvell and Vere's Fairfax,"

ESQ. Vol. 38, No. 1, 1992, pp. 59-70.

Criticism of the novel has often considered the impact of the American and French Revolutions. Larson suggests that the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century should also be noted because of the novel's reference to Andrew Marvel's Civil War poem "Upon Appleton House," which was dedicated to a Puritan army commander, Lord Thomas Fairfax - an "ancestor" of Melville's Captain Vere

Robert Milder, *Critical Essays on Melville's Billy Budd,*

Sailor, G.K. Hall, 1989

A selection of critical essays on Melville's works, ranging over the course of his career, with an introduction by editor Milder.

Susan Mizruchi, "Cataloging the Creatures of the Deep-'Billy Budd, Sailor' and the Rise of Sociology," *Boundary 2,* Spring, 1990, pp. 272-304

Mizruchi sees *Billy Budd* as a critique of the emerging discipline of sociology, which claims to be written by expert observers, and which homogenizes differences between people.

Kathy J. Phillips, "Billy Budd as Anti-Homophobic Text," *College English,* December, 1994, pp. 896-910.

Phillips discusses her experience teaching *Billy Budd* in the college classroom. With the impeded or prohibited speech of Billy in mind, the class thinks about homosexuality in the novel, and how, in general, violence instead of dialogue has typified America's relationship with "other" sexualities.

Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Melville - A Biography,* University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

A biography of Melville that draws upon research into Melville family letters, looks at the Melville-Hawthorne friendship, considers Melville's sexuality, and attends closely to Melville's writings as well as to the critical responses to his works.

Nancy Ruttenburg, "Melville's Anxiety of Innocence. The Handsome Sailor," in *Democratic Personality - Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship,* Stanford University Press, 1998, pp 344-78.

In the context of American literature and history before 1891, *Billy Budd,* Ruttenburg argues, represents mits title character a paramount instance of the desire for an ideal figure, both innocent and beautiful. Emerson and Whitman had suggested and valorized this figure Melville rejects it as an embodiment of an idealized American.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *"Billy Budd.* After the Homosexual," in *Epistemology of the Closet,* University of California Press, 1990, pp. 92-130.

This essay describes John Claggart as a homosexual, and considers the meaning of that man's death Moreover, the entire cast of characters relate to one another according to male desire and intimacy. Like Johnson, Sedgwick undoes binary structure - this time between gay and straight Sedgwick asks, Does male desire stabilize order, or disrupt it'

William T. Stafford, editor, *Melville's Billy Budd and the Critics,* second edition, Wadsworth, 1968.

This comprehensive collection of essays is helpfully arranged by themes and critical debates.

Christopher Sten, "Vere's Use of the 'Forms'- Means and Ends in *Billy Budd," American Literature,* March, 1975, pp 37-51.

Sten compares Vere's authorship of Billy's trial and execution to Melville's authorship of Vere, and analyzes the motivations of each man

Brook Thomas, "*Billy Budd* and the Judgement of Silence,"

Bucknell Review, Vol. 27, 1983, pp 51-78.

Thomas examines Barbara Johnson's assessment of *Billy Budd,* and questions the political implications of her deconstruction of the text.

Howard P Vincent, editor, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd,* Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Not as useful as Milder, Stafford, or Jehlen's compilations, Vincent's collection is divided into two sections, "Interpretations" and "View Points," indicating a loose gathering of responses to Melville and his final novel.

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Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark' Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History,* Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

F. O Matthiessen, *"Billy Budd, Foretopman,"* in his *American Renaissance Art and Experience in the Age of Emerson and Whitman,* Oxford University Press, 1941.

Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor,* edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton S. Sealts, Jr, University of Chicago, 1962.

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William S. Reese, "Collecting Herman Melville," *The Gazette of the Groher Club,* http://www.reeseco.com/pa-pers/melville htm.

W Clark Russell, "A Claim for American Literature," in *North American Review,* February, 1892.

Peter Shaw, "The Fate of A Story," *American Scholar,* Vol 62, No 4, p. 591

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Raymond Weaver, editor, *Shorter Novels of Herman Melville,* Horace Liveright, 1928

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale'sFor Students Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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