

BILLY BUDD

HERMAN MELVILLE

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Herman Melville (1819-1891), descendent of two illustrious American families, received little literary acclaim during his lifetime. Following setbacks in family finances he went to sea at the age of 20. His experiences on the *Acushnet*, a whaler, formed the nucleus of one of his most famous sea stories, *Typee*. His most famous novel, *Moby Dick*, published in 1851, earning for itself the name "that wicked book," was rejected by the reading public. His second best known work, *Billy Budd*, was discovered in his desk after Melville's death and published in 1924.

CRITIC'S CORNER

Billy Budd embodies Melville's belief that natural goodness attains ultimate victory over evil, a philosophy which bolstered the author during his long neglect by the public. The success of this tale of arbitrary justice produced revivals in the form of drama, film, and opera. Its haunting beauty has found a place among critics who continue to argue its meaning. For the reader it offers a subject worthy of high regard: a study of the nature of goodness and innocence.

STUDENT INTRODUCTION

Billy Budd represents the struggle of sailors who suffered forcible impressment by British officers during their war with the French in the eighteenth century. The best sailor of the British merchant ship, *Rights-of-Man*, leaves his ship to face an enforced servitude aboard the H.M.S. *Indomitable*, a man-of-war. The persecutions of one man, Claggart, who envies Billy's equanimity and popularity with his peers, lead to Billy's retaliation under duress. The hero's inevitable punishment for the murder of the petty officer provokes feelings of deep regard and reverence for the honest sailor caught in a series of tragic events.

MEANING STUDY

Below are words and phrases that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning each has in *Billy Budd*. Page numbers refer you to the context from which each item is taken.

1. monomania (p. 53)
(a mental disorder such as Claggart's hatred of Billy in which a rational individual demonstrates irrationality on one subject.)

2. frigate (p. 54)
(a fast, medium-sized sailing ship of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which carries 28 to 60 guns.)
3. dogwatch (p. 54)
(either of two duty periods half the length of the normal period, one from 4 to 6 P.M., and the other from 6 to 8 P.M.)
4. foretop (p. 12)
(the platform at the head of a ship's front mast.)
5. mutiny (p. 18)
(an open resistance of soldiers or seamen against the authority of their commanders.)
6. impressed (p. 7)
(forced or coerced into service of the public, a practice of the eighteenth century particularly aimed at relieving shortages of manpower by the strong-armed removal of merchant sailors from free duty to an enforced period of service to the military.)
7. yardarm (p. 76)
(either end of the slender rod or spar, tapering toward the ends, fastened at right angles across a mast to support a sail.)
8. Apollo (p. 10)
(in Greek and Roman mythology, the god of archery, prophecy, medicine, poetry, and music, and protector of the Muses, and always represented as the highest type of masculine beauty and grace; later identified with Helios, a sun god.)
9. arraign (p. 68)
(to call a prisoner before a court to stand trial, to accuse, to charge with faults, to call to account or in question.)
10. Dansker (p. 32)
(a Dane; a native or inhabitant of Denmark.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your words. Provide the defense of your opinions with references taken from the book.

Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. Describe Captain Vere's death.

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(Captain Vere receives a deathblow aboard the Indomitable on the return passage to the English fleet. Upon active engagement with the French battleship Atheiste the captain is "hit by a musketball from the porthole of the enemy's main cabin." He is carried below and laid alongside the other wounded until he can be put ashore. Lingered a few days under the influence of painkilling drugs, Captain Vere murmurs, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" shortly before his death.)

2. Why are the old Dansker's words described as "pithy"?

(Billy's old friend and adviser gives succinct answers to the boy's questions about his troubles aboard ship. He considers at length in silence before replying and refuses to give justification for his answer. His warnings about "Jemmy Legs" prove true. However, the manner by which the old sailor arrives at his wise counsel are his secret.)

3. At what point in the story does Claggart accuse Billy of mutinous activity?

(The Indomitable, substituting for a suitable fighting ship, gives chase to an enemy frigate. Following the escape of the enemy ship, Captain Vere paces the deck "somewhat chafed at the failure of the pursuit." At this time Claggart chooses to hover at the Captain's elbow to await an audience so that he may report Billy for misconduct.)

4. What picture does the poem "Billy in the Darbies" give of the hero?

(The poem begins with the chaplain's prayers for Billy in the Lone Bay. Rays of moonlight highlight the sword of the guard. Then the poet abruptly changes his view to the future. He compares Billy's execution to a pearl earring: Billy will adorn the yardarm like a jeweled pendant. He will face his death on an empty stomach with only a "bit o' biscuit" and "the last parting cup" offered by his fellow sailors. The speaker's mind wanders over his last moments; he wonders who will perform the fatal duty, he tries to imagine his dreams in the fatal sleep. Thoughts of Donald, who has promised to attend his buddy at his burial, comfort the speaker's worried mind. With a final word to the sentry, the speaker turns his sleepy thoughts to eternal rest among the greenery at the bottom of the ocean.)

5. What people make up the drum-head court?

(For his hasty judicial session Captain Vere chooses three men: the first lieutenant, the same man who boards the merchant ship to choose a sailor for impressment; the captain of marines, although the author notes that the experience of this second member lies more in military matters than in naval

customs; and the sailing master. The only other participant is the captain himself.)

Questions 6-8 Interpretive Level

6. How does Claggart show his irritation after the incident in which Billy spills his soup?

(Claggart makes a light, although pointedly personal remark which the men take for humor. Tapping Billy with his rattan, he says in a low, musical tone, "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" Continuing on his way through the room, his face shapes itself into a grimace which the men can not see. However his immediate encounter with the drummer boy results in a distorted expression from Claggart and the exclamation, "Look where you go!")

7. How does the author reveal Captain Vere's quandary after the trial?

(Although the author discreetly closes the door on Captain Vere's conference with the prisoner, he offers clues to the older man's dual purpose in the story. Dismissing the sentry from his post, the captain, who is old enough to be Billy's parent, enters the condemned man's stateroom cell and alters his own role from military authority to that of counselor. In the author's words, "The austere devotee of military duty letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity may in the end have caught Billy to his heart even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest." The only outward proof of strain upon Captain Vere is evidenced upon his departure, which the senior lieutenant remarks to himself in a startling revelation—that the captain seems to suffer more from his pronouncement of the death sentence than the victim.)

8. How does the author incorporate irony in Billy's farewell to the merchant crew?

(Billy's salutation, "And good-by to you too, old Rights of Man," underscores the ironic meaning of the ship's name, taken from the writings of Thomas Paine, the great pamphleteer of the Revolutionary War era. Billy receives no human rights, no opportunity to choose his destiny, and certainly no escape from sure punishment for his crime. The author's subsequent remarks about the lieutenant's retort indicate that Billy is incapable of satiric intent, insinuation, or "sinister dexterity." At this point in the narrative the author juxtaposes the innocence of the hero alongside the gravity of a situation which allows impressment of human beings. In respect to Billy's short lifespan, he knows no "rights of man.")

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Questions 9-10 Critical Level

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9. What is the effect of so little dialogue in this narrative?

(Because Herman Melville chooses to narrate the events in his own voice, he cultivates a mythic quality in the story. The characters assume the identities of protagonist and antagonist from Greek mythology, representing the deeper, more meaningful aspects of human relationships. The lack of trivial conversation reduces the reader's involvement with peripheral characters. The overall effect is one of distillation—the reduction of the elements of plot to barest minimum for intense scrutiny and internalization. The reader comes away from the story of Billy Budd with a realization that Melville has offered ringside seats to his audience and then treated them to more human drama than they might have chosen to absorb. In summary, Billy Budd is hardly reading for a summer's day; rather, it is the revelation of consequences suffered by human beings caught up in any political situation which negates the worth and dignity of a single man.)

10. Why does the author include the news dispatch?

(The naval authorities' version of the story indicates an awareness on their part of Billy's innocence of any wrongdoing. The fictional details strain at justification for the execution, emphasizing how Claggart has been "vindictively stabbed to the heart." A further removal of facts replaces the identities of both men with outrageous exaggerations—that Billy was "no Englishman, but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens" and that Claggart was "respectable and discreet." The tone of the article suggests premeditation and falsification in an attempt to inform the reader of "the enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal." The conclusion, "Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard H.M.S. Indomitable," ignores the enormity of the crime of impressment and the extreme depravity of the English military in its attempts to provide able-bodied sailors by whatever methods necessary.)

Questions 11-12 Creative Level

11. Choose a scene from the story for enhancement by either drama or artwork. How would you expand the story? What would conversations or drawings reveal to the reader?
12. Compose a letter to Captain Vere's relatives. Include an honest description of his actions in the matter of Billy Budd. Try to evaluate the man's motivation.

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Part I: Multiple Choice (25 points)

- _____ 1. Claggart uses Squeak to (a) invent comments that Billy has supposedly made (b) find the person who has spilled the soup (c) learn who is calling Claggart Jemmy Legs (d) lay little traps for Billy.
- _____ 2. Captain Vere indicates to the surgeon that (a) he doubts Claggart is dead yet (b) Claggart's death must be kept secret from everyone on board (c) he must drag the body into the compartment where Billy waits (d) Billy is innocent, but must hang for his crime.
- _____ 3. The one flaw which keeps Billy from being a conventional hero is (a) his lack of a father (b) his stuttering (c) his feminine, adolescent face (d) his illiteracy.
- _____ 4. After Billy recognizes the afterguardsman in daylight, Billy (a) fails to report the incident to the authorities (b) nods in friendly fashion toward the conspirator (c) makes a casual reply to him (d) labels the man as a cat's-paw.
- _____ 5. Captain Vere turns his back and then begins to pace to-and-fro after (a) Claggart implicates William Budd (b) the surgeon finds no life in the body (c) the three officers sit silently and exchange looks (d) the enemy ship escapes the *Indomitable*.
- _____ 6. Rumor concerning Claggart's past maintains that he (a) never talks about his previous life (b) has been involved in a swindle (c) is an insolvent debtor (d) has been discovered stealing among the hammocks during a night watch.
- _____ 7. The senior lieutenant notices that (a) Captain Vere is old enough to be Billy's father (b) the captain of marines is an unusual choice for service in naval court (c) the condemned man suffers less than does Captain Vere (d) the men can not know "the responsibilities of the sleepless man on the bridge."
- _____ 8. After the incident of the mess, Claggart (a) is eaten away by deep desires to take action against Billy (b) begins to smile knowingly at the after-guardsman (c) urges the armorer and the captain of the hold to question all impressed sailors (d) causes more minor incidents which are meant to worry Billy.
- _____ 9. The surgeon thinks Captain Vere should (a) question Billy in private (b) report his suspicions directly to the captain of marines (c) delay judgment and refer the case to the admiral (d) settle the matter with promptness.
- _____ 10. In his address to his men Captain Vere (a) comments on the consequences of violating discipline (b) states the facts of the case (c) warns the men about the dangers of mutiny (d) calls the crew to a meeting in his quarters.
- _____ 11. The shipmaster regrets Billy's impressment into service aboard the *Indomitable* because (a) Billy makes no comment about leaving the merchant ship (b) Billy has brought peace to the quarreling crew members (c) the carpenter is making a special chest-of-drawers for him (d) Billy has never been instructed in naval decorum.
- _____ 12. At his hanging Billy receives (a) kind treatment from the chaplain (b) a blessing from Captain Vere (c) the farewell of his friend Donald (d) no opportunity for a last word.
- _____ 13. Captain Vere notes that a sailor's buttons attest to (a) the rigor of martial law (b) the clash of military duty with moral scruple (c) an obligation to compassion (d) his allegiance to the King.
- _____ 14. Billy shows respect for the old Dansker because (a) the old sailor renames him "Baby" (b) Billy fears he will suffer punishment similar to the afterguardsman (c) the old man is wise and experienced (d) Billy depends on the old man's defense against "Jemmy Legs."
- _____ 15. When Claggart reports a possible mutiny (a) Captain Vere refuses to be unduly disturbed by the possibility (b) Captain Vere is surprised at Billy's lack of tact (c) Lieutenant Ratcliffe recalls Billy's farewell to the crew of the *Rights of Man* (d) Captain Vere congratulates Lieutenant Ratcliffe for selecting "a King's bargain."
- _____ 16. Other officers refer to the Captain as "Starry Vere" because of (a) his opinions about the recent mutinies (b) his isolation from them (c) his bachelor life (d) his bookish nature.

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- _____17. Captain Vere plans to keep the questioning a secret by (a) sending Albert to fetch Billy (b) threatening Claggart with the yardarm for false testimony (c) refusing to hear Claggart's charge in public (d) approaching Billy while he is still on watch.
- _____18. The first lieutenant claims he believes Billy (a) after the foretopman denies he is a part of a mutiny (b) when Billy explains his speech impediment (c) after Billy describes the cause of the deed as a mystery (d) when Billy acknowledges Captain Vere's charges but not Claggart's.
- _____19. Claggart refers sarcastically to Billy as "handsome" after (a) Billy has problems stowing his bag (b) Billy announces that "Jemmy Legs is down on me!" (c) Billy spills soup on the deck (d) he exclaims to Billy, "Look where you go!"
- _____20. In the last hours before his death, Billy (a) witnesses the burial-at-sea of his victim (b) lies in irons between two guns of the upper gundeck (c) questions the chaplain about salvation (d) kisses the chaplain on the cheek.
- _____21. The lieutenant falteringly suggests (a) a mitigated penalty (b) hanging Billy in the early morning watch (c) that they condemn Billy or let him go (d) that Billy's intent is not pertinent to the case.
- _____22. The story of Billy Budd takes place shortly before (a) the Great Mutiny at Spithead (b) the introduction of firearms to Europe (c) Nelson's victory at Trafalgar (d) the *Monitor's* defeat of the *Merrimac*.
- _____23. Red Pepper, the forecastleman, agrees that (a) impressed sailors should band together (b) the afterguardsman deserves discipline for sneaking around (c) Billy stutters when he is angry (d) it is too hot to sleep below deck.
- _____24. Captain Vere's command to Billy that he defend himself results in (a) a mysterious darkening of Billy's bulging eyes from violet to purple (b) Billy's inability to breathe (c) Billy's refusal to speak (d) a single rapid blow of Billy's right hand.
- _____25. During the incident precipitated by the spilling of the soup, Claggart shows an inkling of (a) intellectualism (b) envy (c) secretiveness (d) punctiliousness.

Part II: Match (12 points)

Which character speaks each line from the book?

- _____ 1. A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies.
- _____ 2. There now, who says that Jemmy Legs is down on me?
- _____ 3. Slip into the lee forechains, Billy, there is something in the wind.
- _____ 4. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here.
- _____ 5. Do you come to me, Master-at-Arms, with so foggy a tale?
- _____ 6. Well, something have been the matter for you st-st-stuttered.
- _____ 7. Fated boy, what have you done!
- _____ 8. I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King.
- _____ 9. But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool.
- _____ 10. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary.

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- _____11. And not till you get well aft here, not till then let him know that the place where he is wanted is my cabin.
- _____12. I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man's door in Bristol.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| A. afterguardsman | E. Claggart |
| B. Billy Budd | F. forecandleman |
| C. Captain Graveling | G. naval chronicle |
| D. Captain Vere | |

Part III: True/False (13 points)

Mark T or F to indicate true or false answers.

- _____ 1. Billy's hammock serves as a canvas coffin.
- _____ 2. The afterguardsman holds out two guineas to the old Dansker.
- _____ 3. The signal to return to quarters is the drumbeat.
- _____ 4. Billy regrets leaving the *Indomitable* to join the blue-jackets.
- _____ 5. The sailor's poem describes Billy's last meal in the mess.
- _____ 6. To the sailors a chip of the spar comes to equal the worth of a piece of the cross.
- _____ 7. After Billy's death the band plays a hymn.
- _____ 8. The men echo Billy's final words.
- _____ 9. Claggart carries a rattan cane to symbolize his office.
- _____10. The sea hawks shriek over the yardarm when Billy is hanged.
- _____11. Captain Vere meets his death in battle after he transfers to the *Atheiste*.
- _____12. The report in *News from the Mediterranean* reports Claggart's death as a stabbing.
- _____13. The surgeon believes Billy's death is a case of euthanasia.

Test Answers

Part I: Multiple Choice

1. D	6. B	11. B	16. D	21. A
2. D	7. C	12. A	17. A	22. C
3. B	8. A	13. D	18. D	23. B
4. A	9. C	14. C	19. C	24. D
5. C	10. B	15. A	20. B	25. B

Part II: Matching

1. E	6. F	11. D
2. B	7. D	12. B
3. A	8. B	
4. C	9. D	
5. D	10. G	

Part III: True/False

1. T	6. T	11. F
2. F	7. T	12. T
3. T	8. T	13. F
4. F	9. T	
5. F	10. F	



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