



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Billy Budd

Herman Melville



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Billy Budd

Herman Melville

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Summary

It is 1799 and Billy—an innocent, handsome young seaman—has been impressed into the British fleet. Although he is loved by almost everyone, Billy arouses the inexplicable hatred of the master-at-arms, Claggart. When Claggart goes to the captain and falsely accuses Billy of mutinous activity, a horrified Billy finds that his stammer keeps him from responding. He strikes out and the evil Claggart dies from the blow. The captain knows that Billy is the real victim, but he has nevertheless killed an officer. The captain decides—in light of recent mutinies—that action must be taken swiftly. Billy is sentenced to death and—in a scene reminiscent of Christ’s crucifixion and ascension—Billy blesses the captain and is hanged.

About the Author

Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819, the third child of an importer whose business eventually failed. When Melville was 13, his father died, and Herman went to work at various jobs—in a bank, on a farm, in a fur factory, at a school, on a packet boat, and on a whaling ship. Disillusioned by living 18 months under a strict captain, he and another sailor deserted and spent a month among reputed cannibals before escaping to Tahiti. He spent some time in jail there, as a mutineer, and explored Tahiti and Hawaii upon his release. At 24, he joined the American Navy and was discharged a little over a year later. Soon after his return home, he began writing about his adventures in the South Seas (the popular *Typee* and its successful sequel, *Omoo*).

He married the daughter of Massachusetts’ Chief Justice and later moved his young family to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he hoped to become a gentleman farmer. He befriended Nathaniel Hawthorne, who influenced the writing of *Moby Dick*, which was not as popular as his earlier books (although today, of course, it is considered his landmark achievement). The friendship and correspondence between Hawthorne and Melville were intense for a while, but then their association cooled. Some of Melville’s books were published first as magazine serials (e.g., *Israel Potter* and *The Piazza Tales*). Other titles by him include: *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Pierre*, *The Confidence Man*, *Battle-Pieces* and *Aspects of the War* (poetry).

After traveling in Europe and the Holy Land, he lectured for three seasons. In 1863 he sold his farm and returned to New York, where he worked as a customs inspector for 19 years. He had four children, but his two sons died before him—one of a self-inflicted gunshot, the other from illness—and his daughters never married. When he retired in 1885, Melville began to write again, producing two books of poetry. When he died, he left *Billy Budd* unfinished. Finally published in 1924, it is now considered by critics to be second in quality only to *Moby Dick*.

Background Information

Britain, late 1700s (the setting for *Billy Budd*)—In 1793, Britain joined in war against revolutionary France and was at war with France until 1815. Great Britain also engaged in a conflict with the U.S.—The War of 1812—primarily as a result of the British impressment (forcible induction into public service) of American seamen. (In the story, Billy Budd is impressed into the service from an English merchant ship.)

French Revolution—popular uprising in France in 1789 resulting in the overthrow of the monarchy of Louis XVI. The Bastille prison was stormed on July 14, 1789; in 1791 the beginnings of a

- d) In a fourth type of log, students divide the page into three columns and respond to the story in three ways:
- comments/questions for the characters
 - comments/questions for the author
 - comments about the reader’s personal reactions to the story

Vocabulary Activities

(See the *Novel Units Student Packet* for several reproducible vocabulary activities.)

1. Divide the following nautical terms among small groups of students (e.g., five groups of students get six words each). Each group creates visual aids for a presentation of the words to the whole class. Visual aids might include labeled diagrams, symbols, cartoons, or posters. These aids should remain on display for ready reference as students read the story.

mutiny 9	man-of-war 10	foretopman 11	impressed 11
forecastle 12	capstan 14	taffrail 15	halyards 17
frigates 20	batteries 25	master-at-arms 29	stunsails 33
corporals 33	belayed 33	bluejacket 37	booms 45
foremast 45	bulwarks 49	mizzenmast 57	yardarm 58
leeward 59	cordage 59	coxswain 60	aft 62
poop deck 66	stateroom 66	carronades 66	porthole 69
spar-deck 78	gyved 79		

2. Before students read a particular section of *Billy Budd*, introduce them to the vocabulary words listed for that section in this guide. Pronounce the words and have students set up a chart like the one below. After reading the word in context, they should predict the definition and discuss the context clues they used to arrive at their guesses. Finally, they should jot down the dictionary definition that fits the way the word is used in the book.

Word	Page	Prediction	Dictionary Definition

3. Alternatively, have students keep a running list of words in the story that are unfamiliar to them. Instruct them to write down what they think each word means, from its context—and why (clues). Then they should consult a dictionary and jot down the appropriate definition.

Word	Page	What I Think It Means	Clues I Used

Writing Idea

1. Someone is setting Billy up—but we never see what pranks are set up or how Billy reacts when he discovers them. Write a scene showing one such sequence.
2. Write an interior monologue showing what Claggart was really thinking during the soup scene.

Research

1. What are some titles you might find in Captain Vere's library?
2. What parallels do you find between the lives and personalities of Captain Vere and Herman Melville?
3. Identify the Radcliffian romance (p. 38), *Mysteries of Udolfo* (p. 38), *Coke and Blackstone* (p. 39).

Chapters 14-18

One night Billy was awakened by Claggart's corporal. When the man offered Billy two guineas and suggested that Billy join a group of impressed sailors in mutiny, Billy was so outraged that he could hardly speak for stammering. In the following days, Billy noticed the malignant glances of Claggart and his messmates, but Billy hardly gave this a second thought.

Vocabulary

gall 43	vitriol 43	contumelious 43	purveyor 44
usurer 44	booms 45	foremast 45	lee 45
emissary 46	forecastleman 46	castigation 47	guineas 47
equivocalness 48	magnanimity 48	bulwarks 49	oracles 49
finesse 50	oblique 50	incipient 51	evanescence 51
apothecary 52	ignominiously 53		

Discussion Questions

1. How did the corporal lie to his chief about Billy? (*The corporal said that Billy was making up jokes and insults at Claggart's expense.*) Why? (*Claggart's loyal corporal knew his boss didn't like Billy and was "fomenting" the bad blood between them.*) Did Claggart know his corporal was lying? (*no*)
2. Why did Claggart's corporal waken Billy? (*to ask if he would participate in mutinous activity*) How did Billy react to being wakened? (*He didn't question the corporal, politely did as told.*) Have you ever been in a situation like this—a reluctance to say no to an "abrupt proposition"?
3. Why did Billy get so upset with Damme once he realized what he was proposing? (*He wanted no part of mutiny.*) How can you tell he was upset? (*He stuttered.*) What do you think would have happened if he had taken the guineas?

-
4. How did Billy and the corporal treat each other by the light of day? (*The corporal acted friendly; Billy was confused and tried to forget the affair.*) What would have happened if Billy had confronted him? Why didn't he?
 5. Whom did Billy tell about the strange encounter? (*He told the Old Dansker.*) Why didn't he tell the whole story? (*He probably didn't want to get anyone in trouble.*) What was his listener's response? (*The old man blamed "Jimmy Legs"—Claggart.*) Did Billy begin to believe that Claggart was up to no good? (*no*) What advice would you give Billy?
 6. According to the narrator, how was Billy like/unlike a child (p. 50)? (*He was innocent; unlike most children his innocence didn't diminish with age.*) Have you ever known anyone like this?
 7. Sometimes Claggart's expression looked "as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (p. 51). What does that mean? (*He had some feelings of attraction to Billy, but fate made it impossible for them to be friends.*) Would Claggart have had it in for Billy if Billy had been plain-looking?
 8. What did Billy make of Claggart's strange glances? (*He just thought Claggart was strange at times.*) Are you surprised Billy wasn't more perceptive?
 9. How did the after-guard's treatment of Billy change? (*He who had tried to trick Billy was very pleasant.*) How does the narrator explain this? (*Billy's simplicity had baffled him.*) Do you agree with this explanation?
 10. **Prediction:** Who will "win" this battle of "good" vs. "evil"—Billy or Claggart? What is the "something decisive [that] must come of it"?

Supplementary Activities

Literary Analysis: Metaphor

A **metaphor** is a specific form of analogy—one which is implied rather than expressed. Point out the metaphor on p. 49 ("old Merlin") and ask who Merlin was—and how the Dansker was like him. (*Merlin was the venerable magician of Arthurian Legend; the Dansker is old, wise, and perceptive.*)

Writing Ideas

1. Write the scene in which the Corporal reports back to Claggart after rousing Billy from sleep.
2. You are a friend of Billy's and you notice the ugly looks some people have been giving him. Give him some advice.

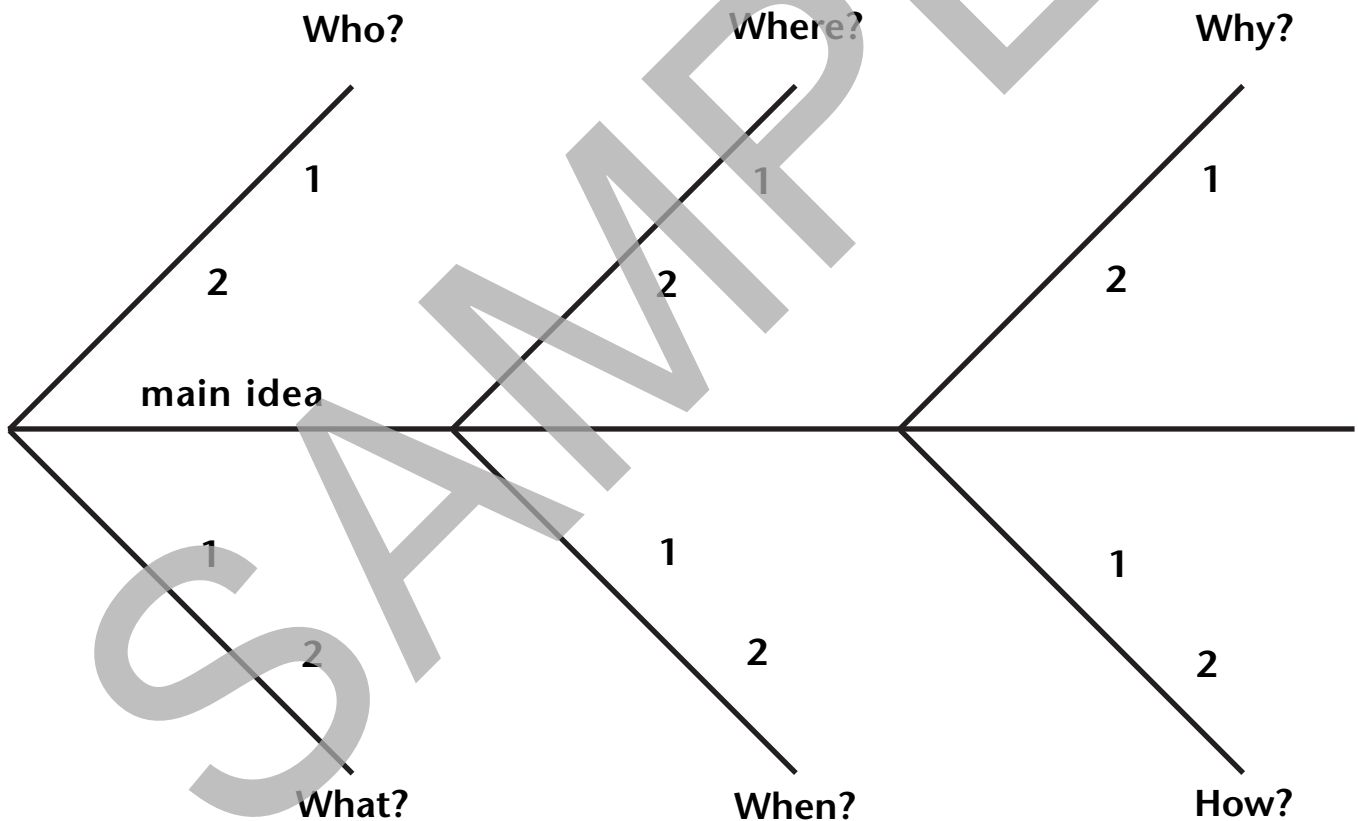
Research

Throughout the story, sailors are referred to as "tars" (p. 46). Have students research the derivation of this term. (Note the reference to "tarry balcony," also on page 46. Possibly the sailors were referred to as "tars" because it was necessary to constantly patch potential leaks with tar, and this job fell to the common sailor.)

convey. The meanings that are independent of the action on the surface may be religious, moral, political, personal, or satiric. *Billy Budd* is often treated as an allegory. **Ask:** What religious and moral meanings might the story of Billy Budd vs. Claggart be intended to convey? (*Sample response: Billy, the “good” force in the story, has a certain fatalistic attitude and is ultimately defeated by “evil”—Claggart—but is “reborn” and long remembered. We can’t always control what happens to us, and sometimes “bad things happen,” but the real heroes are those who continue to strive for “truth and beauty.”*)

Writing Ideas

1. The naval chronicle account of what happened to Claggart (pp. 89-90) was inaccurate. Write an accurate account. Use the graphic below to organize your thoughts.
2. Describe the dream that Captain Vere had about Billy as the captain lay in a delirium, dying. Use a chart like this to outline your ideas.



3. Write a “confession” poem spoken by one of Claggart’s underlings.