

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Billy Budd**

by Herman Melville

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Item No. 201448

# Billy Budd

## Notes

Billy Budd was published in 1924, many years after Herman Melville's death in 1891. There are several versions of the text, which contain many deletions and changes, because the original manuscript was incomplete.

All references come from the Tor edition of *Billy Budd*, copyright 1988.

Note to the Teacher: Due to several short chapters in the story's text, various chapter questions in this packet have been combined.

# Billy Budd

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. recognize the following allusions and discuss their importance to characters and actions in the story.
  - Greek and Roman mythological references
  - historical figures
  - Biblical characters and stories
2. define vocabulary words used in the story.
3. comment on the significance of the names of the ships *The Rights of Man*, and *The Alee*. Discuss how they relate to overall themes in the story, such as war, religion, and individualism.
4. discuss the following theories about this novel and cite incidents from the story to support or refute each theory
  - *Billy Budd* is a symbolic novel paralleling the Bible's story about the fall of man.
  - the character Billy Budd is a Christ-like figure.
5. describe how the novel reinforces this theme: the truth in a situation is often found outside the boundaries set by strict discipline, rigid forms, or legal code.
6. recognize the frequent breaks in the narrative in which the author departs from telling the story and discuss how these digressions
  - establish the political atmosphere of the time
  - establish characterization
  - contribute to the lasting impact of the story.
7. identify the characters referred to in the book by the following epithets or nicknames. How do these names relate to the characters to which they are attributed?
  - Board Her in the Smoke
  - Jemmy Legs
  - Handsome Sailor
  - Squeak
  - Man of Sorrows; Lamb of God
  - Starry Vere
  - Jacob
  - Abraham and Isaac
  - serpent

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## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Briefly identify the following mythological figures: Achilles, Apollo, Bucephalus, Chiron, Hyperion, and Mars.
2. Assume this story is a symbolic tale, paralleling the Bible story of Adam and Eve. If Billy Budd symbolically represents Adam, why do you think he is described as having a stuttering problem when he is surprised? Who do the characters Vere and Claggart represent?
3. In what ways can Billy Budd be described as a Christ-like figure? What do you think is Melville's opinion of the importance of organized religion in helping man attain eternal salvation?
4. Identify the following characters in the story referred to by their nicknames. What significance does the name give the character? Character nicknames Board-Her-in-the-Smoke, Jemmy Legs, Handsome Sailor, squeak, Man of Sorrows, Lamb of God, Baby Budd, Starry Vere
5. Why is *The Rights of Man* a good symbolic name for Billy's first ship? In what ways does the name relate to Billy as an individual, to human individuality, and to the concept of war?
6. Briefly define "the great mutiny." Why do you think Melville breaks away from the story to tell the reader about this historical incident?
7. In what ways can Lord Nelson and Billy Budd both be called heroic? How is Nelson's death different from Vere's? Do you think Melville wants Vere to be considered to be a hero, like Nelson?
8. Write a character sketch of Claggart. Can he be considered a foil for Billy? What evidence is there that he is evil? Why do you think he hates Billy? What qualities make Claggart a very dangerous man to have as an enemy on a confined, isolated ship?
9. Why doesn't Billy turn in the afterguardsman who tries to talk to him about mutiny?
10. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from the chapter: Vere is not insane when he convenes the drumhead court; rather, this behavior is completely consistent with his reputation as a Captain.
11. Dansker warns Billy that Claggart should be considered a foe. Why doesn't Billy try to protect himself? Why doesn't Dansker help Billy defend himself?
12. Briefly identify the following Biblical figures: Ananias, Ham, Abraham, and Isaac. How are they important to the novel?

# Billy Budd

## Chapter 1

### Vocabulary

**alacrity** – eagerness; quickness  
**corpulence** – obesity  
**coxswain** – director of a crew  
**cynosure** – a guiding object, such as a star  
**decoction** – an extraction of flavor from boiling  
**dexterity** – flexibility  
**kith** – acquaintance or relative  
**pagod** – a religious building, garden, or structure  
**proress** – strength or courage in battle  
**retinue** – the attendants or a person in high rank  
**vicissitude** – change

1. Using allusions, Melville often includes references to the constellations, Greek mythology, historical figures, and the Bible when he describes character traits. Identify the following references: cynosure, Aldebaran, Ham, Bucephalus, and Apollo.

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2. “At each spontaneous tribute rendered by the wayfarers to this black pagod of a fellow-tribute of a pause and stare, and less frequently an exclamation-the motley retinue showed that they took that sort of pride in the evoker...” What does the following description of the native African above suggest to the reader about Billy Budd’s character?

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3. In what ways does the following simile help the reader understand Billy Budd? “But Billy came; and it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy.”

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4. List two possible reasons for Claggart's dislike of Billy. Why does Melville reject them both?

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5. Support or refute the following statement by citing passages from this chapter: Claggart is evil because it is his nature to be evil.

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6. List two ways Claggart's evil nature can be hidden most of the time. Why are madmen like Claggart especially dangerous?

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7. In what ways can Claggart be considered to be a foil for Billy?

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4. What does Claggart mean when he says that Billy is “A mantrap ...under the ruddy-tipped daisies”?

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5. Why does Captain Vere think Billy is a “King’s bargain”?

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6. For what reasons does Vere decide to move the discussion about Billy to his cabin?

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7. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from the chapter. Captain Vere has feelings about Claggart and Billy, but he is trying to get to the truth using logic and deductive reasoning.

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