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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Billy Budd

by Herman Melville

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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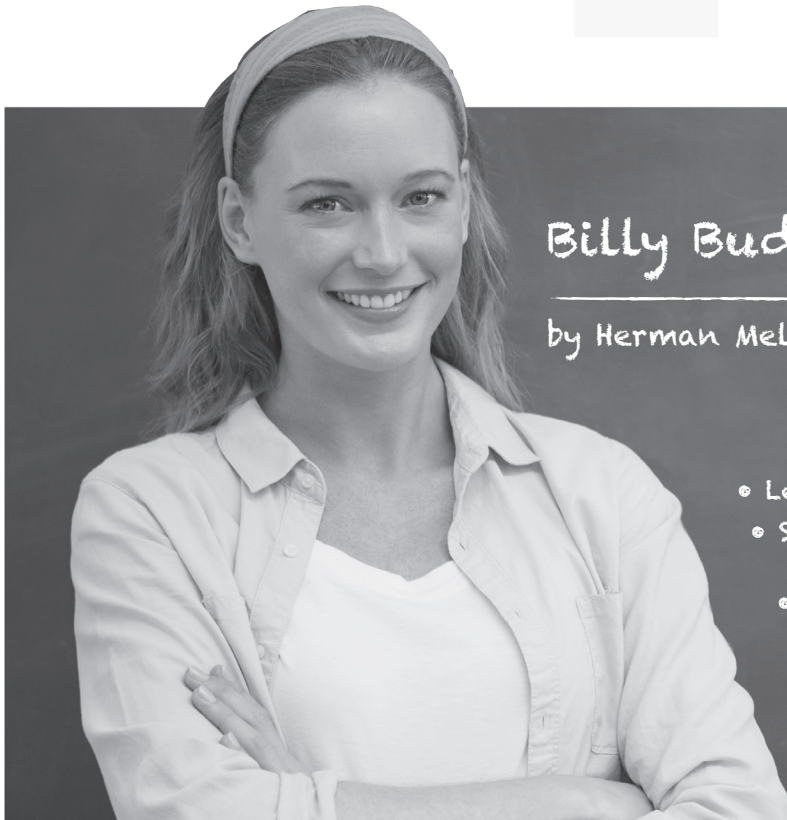
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Billy Budd

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

Billy Budd

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.

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?

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.”

Chapters 3, 4, and 5

Vocabulary

abeyance – suspension
abrogation – abolishment by authority
annals – records of events
calamitous – disastrous
contingencies – uncertainties
contrivance – scheme
divergence – deviation
fastidiousness – attention to detail
frigates – war ships
fustian – pompous speech or writing
gallantry – nobility of action
huzzas – shouts of triumph
iconoclasm – actions and beliefs of someone who seeks to overthrow traditional ideas
insatiate – to satisfy
parleyings – discussions between enemies
plenary – complete
presentiment – premonition
sagacious – showing good judgement

1. What is the “great mutiny”? Why do you think Melville breaks away from Billy’s story to write about this mutiny?

2. Explain the significance of the following quote: “...celebrating among other things, the patriotic devotion of the British tar: ‘And as for my life, ‘tis the King’s!’” How devoted are the men to their country?

Chapters 10 and 11

Vocabulary

acerbity – bitterness
ambidexter – a person who uses both hands equally well; a person who switches sides
auspicious – prosperous
austere – severe in appearance
avaricious – greedy
depravity – moral corruption
enigma – puzzle
incredulity – disbelief
impetuously – passionately
juxtaposition – placed side by side
lexicon – a dictionary
recluses – those who have withdrawn from the world
sagacious – showing sound judgement
vehemently – vigorously

1. How does this chapter add suspense to the story?

2. What evidence is there that the other crew members agree with Dansker and know that Claggart is trying to harm Billy?

3. “Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!” In what way is Claggart’s comment above to Billy an example of sarcasm?

Chapter 18

Vocabulary

augury – divination
clandestine – action done in secret
colloquy – formal conversation
dubious – undecided
etiquette – practices prescribed by convention or authority
evinced – clearly demonstrated
germane – both permanent and fitting
ostentatious – pretentious
perjurous – giving false information in a trial
veritable – genuine

1. Why is the Bellipotent selected to serve as a "...substitute for a scout, but at times on detached service of more important kind"?

2. What does Captain Vere feel when he realizes Claggart is waiting to speak with him?

3. Briefly outline the argument Claggart makes to support his claims that Billy is inciting mutiny aboard the *Bellipotent*.
