

Simon & Schuster Classroom Activities
For the Enriched Classic edition of Billy Budd

Activity #1

What Were They Thinking?
(A Lesson in Character and Narrative Perspective)

By Robert Marantz

Though it is subtitled “An Inside Narrative,” *Billy Budd* is devoid of interior monologues. We do not know what Billy, Claggart, or Vere are thinking unless they actually say it. The narrator speculates from time to time, but mostly leaves the characters’ motives unexplained. By assigning a thought process to each character, students can better understand that character’s actions.

In this lesson, the students will create diaries for Billy, Claggart, and Captain Vere to chronicle the characters’ thoughts and feelings at crucial moments in the story.

This lesson will take one or two class periods (depending on whether the writing is done in class or as homework).

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their words identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

What to Do:

1. Distribute Handout #1. The handout lists some of the significant moments in the novel, as experienced by either Billy Budd, John Claggart, or Captain Vere.

2. Have the students follow the instructions on the handout. (Depending on time constraints, you can assign some or all of the moments listed, or divide the class into three groups—one for Billy’s diary, one for Claggart’s, and one for Vere’s.)

3. After the students complete their diaries, go over each moment by calling on two or three students to read from their diaries. How do the students view each character and his motivations in those particular scenes? Are there wide disparities of opinion? If so, why?

4. Ask the class how their own backgrounds colored their opinion of the characters and their motivations. How does the story change when told from a character’s perspective rather than a narrator’s?

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (ISBN: 0671028332) for each student

Handout #1

How Did It Go?

Did the students read *Billy Budd* simply as a tale of injustice or did they also perceive the historical, religious, and sexual aspects of the story in the characters themselves? Which diary entry did they think was hardest to write and why?

“Yet The Angel Must Hang!” (A Lesson in Persuasion)

By Robert Marantz

During Bill Budd’s trial, Captain Vere poses the following questions to the tribunal:

“If, mindless of palliating circumstances, we are bound to regard the death of the master-at-arms as the prisoner’s deed, then does that deed constitute a capital crime whereof the penalty is a mortal one. But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner’s overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?” (Pages 66-67)

And yet, Vere compels the tribunal to consider only the facts of the case and not let emotion come into play. The tribunal follows Vere’s recommendations and, based solely on the facts, Billy is sentenced to death. The question lingers: Did Captain Vere recommend the right course of action?

In this lesson the class will debate Captain Vere’s decision: Was he correct to execute Billy Budd?

This lesson will take two class periods: one for each side of the debate to prepare their points and counterpoints, and one for the actual debate.

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their words identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

What to Do:

1. Divide the class in half. One half will argue in favor of Vere's decision, the other half will argue against it. Require three points to support each position. Both sides should also prepare opening and closing statements, and should be ready to rebut the points of the opposing side.
2. Give each group a copy of Handout #2—Articles of War (1757). Review the handout with the class.
3. Allow time for both groups to research materials for the debate (via the library or Internet). Some good topics to pursue are the Napoleonic Wars, the Articles of War (1757), and the Nore and Spithead Mutinies. Additional materials can be found on pages 107-127 of your text.
4. Once the groups have their arguments ready, the debate should play out as follows: Each side will have 30 seconds to present its opening statement. The "For" side will then have one minute to present its first point; The "Against" side will have 30 seconds to rebut that point, and then one minute to present its first point (and so forth). When all six points have been presented and rebutted, each side gets one minute to make a closing statement.
5. When the debate is over, lead a discussion in which each side evaluates how the other side did. Ask them: How clear was the other side's thesis? How well did the other side use evidence? On a scale from one to ten, how effective was the other side and why? The

key here is to learn how to form strong arguments from a good thesis and strong evidence.

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (ISBN: 0671028332) for each student

Access to the Internet or a library

Handout #2

How Did It Go?

Has the class been persuaded to side with or against Vere? Were there any arguments that one side failed to offer that might have strengthened their position? What position does the class think the narrator in *Billy Budd* ultimately takes?

Trading Places **(A Lesson in Irony)**

By Robert Marantz

At the end of *Billy Budd*, Melville creates an authorized account of the tragic incident aboard the *Bellipotent*. The article in the naval chronicle “New from the Mediterranean” portrays Claggart as a man with a “strong patriotic impulse” who was “vindictively stabbed” by a villain of “extreme depravity.” This inaccurate description becomes the official story, and thus forever labels Claggart a victim and Billy his victimizer.

But readers of *Billy Budd* know otherwise. And it forces the reader to consider the irony of a situation where someone stands up to his oppressor and is ultimately punished for his actions.

This lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their words identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

What to Do:

1. Begin by asking students to list the characteristics of bullies. Write these characteristics on the board.
2. Then ask the class how many of those characteristics listed apply to Claggart. In what ways does he bully Billy? Can the students relate to Billy in this situation? How else could he have handled it?
3. Ask the students to identify the point in the book where Claggart and Billy switched roles (note: this occurs in the second paragraph on page 60). If Billy represents good and Claggart represents evil then why did Melville choose to make this switch? Does Billy's fate represent justice or injustice?
4. Have a student read the naval chronicle's account of the incident on pages 85-86. What purpose does this account serve for people in the world of Billy Budd? For the people of Billy's world, in a time of war and mutiny, perhaps this account is necessary. Ask the students for current day examples of an overt lie being told to serve "the greater good."

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (ISBN: 0671028332) for each student.

How Did It Go?

The role reversal of victim and victimizer in *Billy Budd* is an excellent example of irony. Do the students understand why irony sometimes plays a necessary role in stories and in life?

Handout #1

Directions: For each entry, describe in the character's own words what he was thinking at that moment.

Billy's Diary Entries:

1. After the Dansker tells Billy that Claggart "is down on" Billy (p.30)
2. After the afterguardsman approaches Billy about a mutiny (pp.39-41)
3. After Billy kills Claggart (p.56)
4. After Vere talks to Billy about the verdict (p.71)

Claggart's Diary Entries:

1. After Claggart sees Billy for the first time (This is pure conjecture—no such scene occurs in *Billy Budd*.)
2. After Claggart steps over Billy's spilled soup (p.31)
3. After Claggart tells Vere about Billy and the mutiny (pp.49-54)
4. After Claggart accuses Billy directly in front of Vere (p.55)

Captain Vere's Diary Entries:

1. After Vere hears Claggart's accusation about Billy (pp.49-54)
2. After Vere argues before the tribunal to follow martial law and condemn Billy (pp.66-70)
3. After Vere talks to Billy about the verdict (p.71)
4. After Billy says, "God Bless Captain Vere!" and is hanged (p.79)

Handout #2

(Relevant excerpts from the 1757 Articles of War)

Articles of War (1757)

4. *If any letter of message from any enemy or rebel, be conveyed to any officer, mariner, or soldier or other in the fleet, and the said officer, mariner, or soldier, or other as aforesaid, shall not, within twelve hours, having opportunity so to do, acquaint his superior or a commanding officer, or if any superior officer being acquainted therewith, shall not in convenient time reveal the same to the commander in chief of the squadron, every such person so offending, and being convicted thereof by the sentence of the court martial, shall be punished with death, or such other punishment as the nature and degree of the offense shall deserve, and the court martial shall impose.*

22. *If any person in the fleet shall quarrel or fight with any other person in the fleet, or use reproachful or provoking speeches or gestures, tending to make any quarrel or disturbance, he shall, upon being convicted thereof, suffer such punishment as the offence shall deserve, and a court martial shall impose.*

27. *All murders committed by any person in the fleet, shall be punished with death by the sentence of a court martial.*