

Analyzing *Billy Budd, Sailor*

Below are various well-known interpretations of Herman Melville's central meaning in this work. For the reading to which you are assigned, formulate group responses to each of these questions:

1. Which characters, events, and/or passages support the interpretation?
2. What did Melville seem to be saying—his theme—about the topic? As the introduction to your group's report to the class, devise a clear thesis statement that includes that theme and refers to the narrative elements you identified in response to #1 above.
3. How valid is this interpretation?

Billy Budd, Sailor as RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL ALLEGORY

Consider religious archetypes (setting, characters and events), Old and New Testament allusions, symbols, diction, and descriptive details—anything that suggests Melville's "bigger story" is about human spirituality, the spiritual state of mankind, the sources and nature of good and evil, etc.

Billy Budd, Sailor as ROMANTIC ALLEGORY

Consider Romantic values (refer to the list of neoclassical vs. Romantic values), allusions that confirm those values, tone, diction, etc. Also consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the *noble savage* as it applies. Where are the narrator's sympathies, and how can you tell? What evidence of "romanticizing" the narrative do you find? What are the effects of these elements/details?

Billy Budd, Sailor as ALLEGORY OF MALE SEXUALITY

Consider patterns of admiration / attraction in the novella. Is it homoerotic or homosocial, e.g., role models and hero worship? Some combination of the two types? Review descriptive details about physical appearance (especially those that are gender-coded), characters' motives, impulsive or involuntary actions (i.e., physiological, instinctual, or representative of feelings and desires instead of logic or intellect) and their symbolic value.

Billy Budd, Sailor as POLITICAL ALLEGORY

Consider details, characters, and actions that symbolize the rights, responsibilities, and goals of government vs. those of individuals within society. What questions does the text raise about duty, authority, the relative legitimacy of various social, moral, and legal codes, and their impact on the rights of the individual? What happens when the individual is voiceless in the face of power?