

***Billy Budd* by Herman Melville**

1. The story deliberately sees itself as describing events taking place before steam had replaced sail, another, distant-seeming world. At the time, England and other European states were leagued in war against France, represented by Napoleon Bonaparte, who was thought by many in the United States to represent the force of republicanism, if not democracy, and the end of the political authority and privilege royalty and nobility. Indeed, the story tells us at one point (chapter 8), that veterans of the American revolution hoped that he might carry his conquests across the Atlantic. The events of the story, therefore, take place during a war against France whose purpose was to make the world safe from democracy, not for democracy. How does this circumstance color the story as a whole?
2. Billy is an ordinary seaman, impressed into service (as the law allowed) by a man-of-war to make up the loss of a seaman upon it. Why does Billy offer a farewell salute to his ship, *The Rights of Man*? How should his cry of farewell be taken?
3. The narrator contrasts the vices of ordinary sailors with the vices of those who claim "respectability". What is the point of the contrast?
4. Chapter four offers an account of Nelson, who died at Trafalgar. There is, throughout, an implied contrast with Captain Vere. How would you develop the contrast?
5. The three main characters, Billy, Vere, and Claggart are described at some length before the story gets under way. How would you sum up Billy's character? Why was he called "the peacemaker"? How did he bring about peace on the only occasion that we know about before he joined Vere's ship? What is the significance of his stammer?
6. How would you describe Vere? His belief in the justice of the English cause is tied to a mistrust of "innovators" and political revolutionaries; his suspicion of those who would destroy aristocratic privilege is, the narrative says, "disinterested". Does the narrative admire him? Does it, on the whole, take his side?
7. Describe Claggart and his role upon the ship. What is his effect upon his subordinates? Why does the narrative wish that it could resort to Biblical usage to describe him? Who in the narrative does resort to Biblical references to describe events? The wish to use Biblical language is expressed during the narrative's attempt to explain why Claggart hates Billy. How does the narrative explain the hatred? Is the explanation a good one?
8. The old Dansker says that Claggart always has a good word for Billy because Claggart hates Billy. What does he mean by this?
9. Does Claggart believe the charges that he levels against Billy? How would you support your answer?
10. Why does Billy strike Claggart? Did he commit murder? Does Vere think that he committed murder? Why does Vere convene a court-martial aboard ship? Why does the doctor think that Vere has gone mad?
11. If you were on the court-martial and Vere did not speak before a verdict was to be rendered, how would you vote? Would Vere's speech make a difference to your vote?
12. The narrative can tell us what passed through Billy's mind when he is summoned to Vere's cabin? Why does the narrative pointedly refuse to tell us what passed between Vere and Billy after the court-martial?
13. The narrative compares Vere to Abraham and Billy to Isaac. Is the comparison justified?
14. The narrative offers three consecutive endings to the story, chapters 28, 29 and 30, any one of which could have concluded the story by itself. What is the point of this device?
15. At the end of chapter 21, the narrative draws a distinction between the viewpoint of those in authority during emergencies and those under authority or protected by it. What are the ethical implications of this distinction? Are they legitimate considerations in judging those in authority?