

Study Questions for

Billy Budd

Chapters 1-12

1. What does Billy Budd look like? How old is he? What do you know about his background? his education?
2. Why does a chapter on the Handsome Sailor precede the description of Billy Budd? Why is he compared to mythological figures (Achilles, Apollo, Hyperion, Hercules, Adam before the Fall)? Does Billy seem quite real? Is he supposed to?
3. What is Billy's position aboard the *Rights of Man*? Why is the captain so unhappy to lose him?
4. When Billy is impressed into the navy, he calls farewell to his ship. "And good-bye to you too, old *Rights of Man*." What does he mean? What do we learn about Billy in this episode?
5. Why is the Dansker at first amused by Billy, then somewhat concerned for him?
6. What is Billy's one physical defect? Why do we associate this defect with innocence?
7. Contrast Billy's appearance with Claggart's.
8. Contrast Billy's background with Claggart's.
9. Melville describes Billy Budd as an "upright barbarian" whose vices (such as the are) proceed "less from viciousness than exuberance of vitality; frank manifestations in accordance with natural law." What sort of vices is Melville talking about? How do they differ from Claggart's?
10. Melville explains the evil in Claggart by referring to the Biblical phrase, "Mysteries of iniquity," and to the Platonic theory of Natural Depravity. Is Claggart, as a character, any more "realistic" than Bill Budd?

Chapters 13-end

11. Why does Claggart hate Billy?
12. Why is Billy blind to Claggart's hatred, even after the Dansker has waned him of it?
13. How does Billy's innocence destroy him?
14. What sort of commander is Vere?
15. Why does he sometimes puzzle the other officers?
16. How does Vere react when Claggart approaches him with the story of unrest among the crew?
17. Why does Vere decide to have Claggart confront Budd in his cabin?
18. Captain Vere has heard about Billy's farewell to the *Rights of Man* and has mistaken it for a satiric sally. In what way has he misjudged Billy? If Vere had known the truth, would he have suggested a confrontation between Billy and Claggart?
19. What two responses does Billy call forth in Captain Vere? After the murder of Claggart, which response is predominant?
20. What conflict is raging in Vere? Why does the surgeon think Vere has gone mad?
21. At this point, how does the Nore Mutiny affect the action?
22. Most of the officers want to hold Billy under arrest until the ship rejoins the squadron and the case can be referred to the admiral. Why does Vere insist on an immediate trial by a drumhead court?
23. Vere tells the court to ignore Claggart's motives for lying about Billy. Why does this make them so

uncomfortable?

24. Vere knows that there is conflict in the members of the court. How does he describe it? What set of terms does he use?
25. Vere knows that Billy is "innocent before God." Why does he condemn him?
26. What is Melville saying about the fate of innocence in an institutionalized world?
27. How has Melville's characterization of Vere prepared us for Vere's decision?
28. With the murder of Claggart, the father in Vere is replaced by the military disciplinarian. In the final interview between Vere and Billy, Vere's fatherly feelings again find expression. Why can Vere now unbend?
29. How does Billy take the verdict?
30. Describe Billy's attitude while awaiting execution. Why does the chaplain slip away?
31. Melville describes Billy lying on the gun-deck as "a slumbering child in the cradle." At the beginning of the novel, he spoke of Billy's "lingering adolescent expression." Has Billy changed with his encounter with evil?
32. If Billy were less serene and more rebellious, how would it change the tone of the book?
33. We said earlier that Billy's innocence destroys him. Is he really destroyed?
34. What is unusual about Billy's execution? How does Melville suggest that this is something more than a natural death?
35. In what mood does the crew receive the news of Billy's conviction? What effect do Billy's last words have on them?
36. Is the crew's mood of renewed loyalty permanent? Where else do they threaten to rise in anger against the officers? How are these movements stopped?
37. Do these incidents support Vere's judgement?
38. Vere, dying, utters Billy's name. In what tone of voice? Is Vere convinced that Billy's death was necessary?