

BILLY BUDD

by Herman Melville



THE AUTHOR

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York City. His family later moved to Albany, where his father died and young Herman was forced to go to work in a bank at age 13. He later served briefly as an elementary school teacher and a newspaper reporter. At age 19, he went to sea for the first time. Two years later, he embarked on a lengthy whaling expedition, where he gained the knowledge that became the foundation for his great novels. During the expedition, he and another sailor left the ship on a Pacific island, where he found himself among a tribe of cannibals. His experience became the foundation for his first novel, *Typee* (1846), the most popular of his works during his lifetime. This was followed by *Omoo* (1847) and Melville's great classic, *Moby Dick* (1851). At the time *Moby Dick* was published, Melville had recently met Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose work he greatly admired and to whom he dedicated his masterwork. Melville continued writing until his death in 1891, producing increasingly experimental works including the short story *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) and the short novel *Billy Budd* (1891).

Melville was a pessimist, an unhappy loner who struggled with despair throughout his life. In the world around him and within himself he saw little but evil. *Billy Budd* was his last literary effort, and is considered by many to be his best work after his classic *Moby Dick*. The story is based in part on an actual incident that occurred aboard the U.S.S. *Somers* in 1842 in which Melville's cousin was involved. When the author died, he left the manuscript in rough form with some notations written by his wife. It was discovered years later among his papers and not published until 1924. Several editors have at various times worked on the manuscript; as a result significantly different versions of the story exist in print. Interpretations of the novel have varied widely, with some viewing it as an affirmation of religious faith while other see it as an ultimate statement of the author's cynicism.

PLOT SUMMARY

Melville begins by describing the quintessential Handsome Sailor, a man of strength, beauty, and moral fiber admired by his shipmates. He then identifies Billy Budd, a twenty-one-year-old foretopman at the end of the eighteenth century, as one such man. Billy had been impressed onto the H.M.S. *Bellipotent* shortly before the story begins. Lieutenant Ratcliffe had

boarded a merchantman, the *Rights-of-Man*, and chosen only Billy for impressment, to which the young sailor had offered no objection, though the captain certainly had. He argued that Billy was the crew's peacemaker, and that their affection for him had calmed down what had before been a contentious lot, even though the admirable conditions had only been attained after Billy gave one obstreperous sailor nicknamed Red Whiskers a sound drubbing.

Billy soon fits in with the crew of his new vessel, and does so with good cheer. Upon questioning, the captain discovers that he is a foundling, but his appearance and bearing leave little doubt that he is of noble blood. He is illiterate, but has a beautiful singing voice. As a result, the educated men on the crew take to him immediately, while the rough sailors below decks resent him without knowing why. He, meanwhile, likes everybody and is innocent of the mixed reactions around him. His only blemish is that he stutters when under duress.

The year is 1797, and shortly before the story begins there had been serious mutinies aboard British vessels at Spithead and Nore, sparked by the revolutionary ideas emanating from France (though after the mutinies were put down, the same sailors went on to win glory at the Battle of the Nile and at Trafalgar). Officers are thus alert to any signs of trouble, so much so that Lord Nelson is transferred to one of the ships that had mutinied so that his heroic presence can calm the crew. [At this point Melville takes a short detour to talk about Nelson's heroism and death aboard the *Victory* at Trafalgar.] The *Bellipotent*, however, shows no sign of restlessness that might presage mutiny. The captain of the ship, Captain Vere, is a skilled and experienced leader who cares for his men's welfare but will brook no lapse in discipline. He is of aristocratic heritage, loves books, and has a reputation as somewhat of a distant intellectual. The master-at-arms, whose duty is to keep order below decks on the ship, is a man named John Claggart. He is unpopular with the men, and though nothing is known of his past, rumors persist that he joined the navy to avoid imprisonment as a swindler. He has risen rapidly to his rank on the ship, both because of his native ability and because he operates a network that enables him to bully anyone who gets in his way.

The day after Billy's impressment, one of the sailors is flogged for being absent from his post, and Billy is so horrified by the brutality of it that he vows never to do anything to put himself into such a predicament. He enjoys his work on the foretop and is so diligent that his mates tease him about it. Strangely, though, he finds himself frequently facing run-ins with Claggart's underlings because of a hammock improperly made or some such other minor infraction. An old mainmastman, the Dansker, befriends Billy and tells him that, on the master-at-arms' orders, Claggart's men have been messing up his hammock in order to get him in trouble, though Billy has trouble believing him. The next day, Billy spills his soup, and Claggart treats him very kindly, though with a strange expression on his face, then beats a drummer boy for no good reason. [Melville then strays into an analysis of Claggart's character as an example of a depraved nature that, though outwardly rational, will use that reason for irrational ends, fixing itself on doing evil to an undeserving object. He speculates that Claggart hates Billy because of Billy's handsome appearance and his native innocence, which he perceives but cannot have.] Meanwhile Squeak, a corporal under Claggart who has been deputed to harass Billy, spews poison into his master's ear to the effect that Billy not only spilled the soup in his path on purpose, but has been slandering him in the mess when he is out of earshot, all of which Claggart readily believes, since it fits his irrational anger, and causes him to attempt further persecutions of the innocent sailor.

A few days later, Billy is awakened in the middle of the night by a strange voice who tells him to meet him in the lee forechains. Billy complies, and the sailor sounds him out about a

mutiny brewing among the impressed men. Billy, so upset that he begins to stutter, tells the man to leave or he will throw him overboard. Billy is puzzled and troubled by the encounter, especially when he sees the man later and he appears harmless. In his innocence, he never thinks of reporting the conversation, not realizing its seriousness and not wanting to be a bearer of tales, but when he tells the Dansker about it one evening, the old man immediately concludes that Claggart is again after Billy. The young sailor, however, refuses to suspect Claggart of something so dastardly, especially since the incidents with the hammock soon ceased. Claggart, however, continues to look at Billy with inexplicable malice behind his back, and soon others of his bunkmates are doing the same; clearly the master-at-arms has been spreading false rumors. Billy, still very popular with the majority of his shipmates, remains totally oblivious.

One day the *Bellipotent*, while on a reconnaissance mission, gives chase to an enemy frigate but fails to catch her. After the chase, Claggart asks for a word with Captain Vere and tells him that during the chase he had observed what appeared to be clandestine activity directed by one of the impressed sailors, hinting that a mutiny could be in the works. Captain Vere, though he has an instinctive distrust of Claggart, demands the name of the sailor in question, and the master-at-arms identifies him as Billy Budd. Claggart then insinuates that Billy's cheerful mein and popularity with the crew are masks hiding his true intentions. Vere is astounded at the charge, having been so pleased with Billy's performance to this point that he is thinking of promoting him. The captain reminds Claggart that the penalty for false witness is hanging, and asks him for substantiating evidence for his charge. Claggart can give no more than a few circumstantial remarks and actions that are open to varied interpretations, for which he claims to be able to summon supporting testimony. Vere considers whether or not to interview witnesses, but decides that such a strategy would get the crew all worked up over the matter. Instead, he decides to keep his eye on Billy for a while, and instructs his orderly to summon Billy to his cabin.

Billy is surprised to find himself alone in the captain's cabin with Vere and Claggart, but has no thoughts of potential danger, but hopes that the captain has summoned him to give him a more responsible position on the ship. Vere then demands that Claggart make his accusations to Billy's face, which startles the young man beyond belief. When asked by the captain to defend himself, he falls into a fit of stammering and is unable to speak coherently; frustrated, he then kills Claggart with one punch to the head. Vere believes the master's death is a matter of divine judgment, yet realizes that Billy must hang for it. Under normal circumstances such an incident would be referred to the admiral of the fleet, but because the ship is out on reconnaissance, Vere decides to have a drumhead trial on board rather than postpone the matter. The surgeon and the lieutenants think this strange and begin to wonder about Vere's mental stability. Vere, on the other hand, is faced with a conundrum in which principles of right and wrong are clearly at odds with strict legal justice, and decides to keep the matter secret, believing that the fewer people who know what happened, the better. Furthermore, he feared that if knowledge of the incident got out, it might stir up any slumbering embers of rebellion present on the ship.

The trial takes place in the captain's cabin. Captain Vere calmly describes to the three judges what had happened, including Claggart's accusations, Billy's response, and the ensuing altercation. When Billy is asked to answer the captain's description, he affirms that Vere has spoken truly, but insists that Claggart's charges were completely false. When asked if he bore any ill will toward the master-at-arms, Billy says he did not, and explains that he only struck him because of his inability to respond to his malicious charges with his tongue - a decision that he regrets. When asked if he knew anything of talk of mutiny on the ship, Billy, again reluctant to

turn informer, denies any such knowledge, refusing to reveal the conversation with the crewman in the forechairs. Billy is then asked why Claggart should have made such malicious charges against him, but he has no idea; the captain then argues that the question is immaterial to the point of law before the court. Brought face to face with this reality, the judges realize the seriousness of Billy's position, though he still does not.

After Billy is escorted back to the cabin where he is confined, the judges begin to deliberate; they clearly want to find a way to exonerate him. Finally the captain speaks and reminds them that they are not free agents in this case, but simply instruments through whom the law acts. He argues that private feelings or conscience can have no part in the case, nor can Billy's intent in the situation. He reminds the judges that Billy's action would have been a capital crime even if Claggart had not died. He even goes so far as to argue that, though Billy is likely to be acquitted before the court of Heaven, he cannot be freed by a military court in time of war. Vere urges a swift decision, since they may at any time be set upon by a French ship. When the judges ask if Billy may be declared guilty and yet the sentence reduced, the captain tells them such a move would be deadly to naval discipline. Following the captain's exhortations, the judges condemn Billy to die by hanging the next morning. Vere goes alone to communicate the sentence to Billy, and the two decent men commiserate with one another in what must come to pass; indeed, the captain suffers more than Billy from the encounter.

From the time Billy first entered the captain's cabin until the conversation just alluded to, less than half an hour passes, but rumors are already spreading among the crew as to what might be going on. Vere then addresses the crew and informs them of what has transpired; they are dumbfounded. Shortly thereafter Claggart is buried at sea with appropriate honors and ceremonies. As Billy awaits his death, he is completely at peace. Even the chaplain is unable to impress upon him the seriousness of what is about to happen, and the young man listens politely, but does not respond, to his presentation of the Gospel. At dawn, the crew is gathered on deck and Billy is hanged from the mainyard. His last words, repeated by the mesmerized crew, are "God bless Captain Vere!" Much to the amazement of the onlookers, Billy's body does not twitch at all when it is elevated by the rope. The purser and the surgeon discuss this phenomenon, but are unable to explain it. Billy's body is then prepared for burial at sea, being tied up in his hammock and weighted, and slides off the plank into the deep with sea birds gathering around the place where the body sinks.

On the way back to join the fleet, the *Bellipotent* encounters the French ship *Athee* (the *Atheist*) and comes away victorious, though in the battle Captain Vere is seriously wounded. He is taken to Gibraltar, where he dies; the last words on his lips are "Billy Budd." Weeks later, a news account of the incident portrays Claggart as the innocent victim, says that he was stabbed to death using a concealed knife, and speculates that Billy was a French spy who had attempted to subvert the British war effort. The sailors on board the *Bellipotent*, meanwhile, religiously kept track of the mainyard from which Billy had been hanged, treating it almost as a holy relic. Melville ends the novella with a poem, supposedly circulated in honor of Billy Budd.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Billy Budd - A young, earnest, and naive sailor at the heart of the narrative.

- Captain Graveling - The captain of the *Rights-of-Man*, the merchantman from which Billy is taken, he is a serious and hard-working officer who complains that Ratcliffe is taking his best man.
- Lieutenant Ratcliffe - The officer who forces Billy to leave the *Rights-of-Man* and join the crew of the *Bellipotent*.
- Edward Fairfax Vere - Captain of the *Bellipotent*, nicknamed “Starry Vere,” he is a skilled seaman and commander and an honest man who loves books and the world of thought.
- John Claggart - Master-at-arms aboard the *Bellipotent*, he has an irrational grudge against Billy and is determined to bring him down. Billy accidentally kills him when he makes false accusations against him.
- The Dansker - An elderly mainmastman who had served under Nelson, he befriends Billy and warns him against Claggart.
- Squeak - A corporal who does Claggart’s bidding in getting Billy in trouble.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*.” (Billy, ch.1)

“By his original constitution aided by the co-operating influences of his lot, Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the Serpent wriggled himself into his company.” (ch.2)

“But the thing which in eminent instances signalizes so exceptional a nature is this: Though the man’s even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound.” (ch.11)

“With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart’s, surcharged with energy as natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it.” (ch.12)

“An uncommon prudence is habitual with the subtler depravity, for it has everything to hide. And in case of an injury but suspected, its secretiveness voluntarily cuts it off from enlightenment or disillusion; and, not unreluctantly, action is taken upon surmise as upon certainty.” (ch.13)

“To an immature nature essentially honest and humane, forewarning intimations of subtler danger from one’s kind come tardily if at all.” (ch.19)

“Fated boy, what have you done!” (Captain Vere, ch.19)

“Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” (Captain Vere, ch.19)

“Innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places. In a legal view the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless; and the indisputable deed of the latter, navally regarded, constituted the most heinous of military crimes. Yet more. The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea commander, inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis.” (ch.21)

“Suppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it.” (Captain Vere, ch.21)

“I feel as you do for this unfortunate boy. But did he know our hearts, I take him to be of that generous nature that he would feel even for us on whom in this military necessity so heavy a compulsion is laid.” (Captain Vere, ch.21)

“The greater the fog the more it imperils the steamer, and speed is put on though at the hazard of running somebody down.” (ch.21)

“Not that like children Billy was incapable of conceiving what death really is. No, but he was wholly without irrational fear of it, a fear more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterated Nature.” (ch.24)

“Bluntly put, a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War - Mars. As such, he is as incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas. Why, then, is he there? Because he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because too he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force.” (ch.24)

“God bless Captain Vere!” (Billy, ch.25)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the author uses a multitude of biblical allusions. Choose three such allusions and evaluate their validity. Does Melville use them with the same meaning they have in Scripture? Why or why not? How do they contribute to the main themes of the story?
2. At various times in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the author compares Billy to Adam, Isaac, and Joseph. What are the points of these comparisons? Evaluate the accuracy of these biblical allusions in the novel and discuss their role in the narrative.
3. Discuss the concept of the noble savage as it appears in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. Billy is several times called a barbarian, and near the time of his death, the author compares him to savages past and present. What is Melville trying to communicate here? What does this tell you about his understanding of human nature and human society? What does it tell you about his understanding of and appreciation for Christianity?
4. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, to what extent is the title character a Christ figure? If you conclude that he is, explain in what ways he fulfills this role and support your arguments with specific incidents and quotations from the novel. What does this tell you about the author's understanding of Christ and His ministry?
5. Is Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* a tragedy? If so, what is the title character's fatal flaw? Is this flaw, unlike those of most tragic protagonists, an admirable quality? Why or why not? Be sure to use specifics from the novel to support your answer.
6. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the battle between good and evil is personified by two characters, one almost completely good and the other almost completely evil. Does this stark contrast detract from the realism of the novel, or does it convey more clearly the author's understanding of the great struggle that all men face? Support your conclusion with specifics from the story.
7. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the author describes the character of Claggart as unusually given to evil. Does Melville's assertion that Claggart is an exception to common human nature weaken the impact of his portrayal of evil? What does it say about the author's understanding of human nature? Be sure to incorporate Scripture into your analysis of this issue.
8. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, to what extent is Claggart intended to represent Satan? Does his function as a deceiver and destroyer who can think of nothing but evil suit him for such a role? How might such an interpretation affect the reader's understanding of the meaning of the novel?

9. Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* presents a stark conflict between what is legal and what is right, largely personified in the character of Captain Vere. What does Melville believe about such a dilemma? Does he take sides, or allow the reader to draw his own conclusions? Support your analysis with specifics from the book.
10. Evaluate the drumhead trial of the title character in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. Was the verdict right or wrong? Support your conclusion from the novel, paying careful attention to Captain Vere's arguments, as well as from Scripture.
11. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Captain Vere struggles between his duty as a man to his conscience and his duty to naval regulations as a ship captain. He decides to give precedence to the latter, and his conscience never lets him forget what he did. Is this one of those circumstances when the letter of the law should have given way to personal instinct? Why or why not? Give clear and cogent reasons to justify your answer.
12. In considering the religious aspects of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, to what extent may Captain Vere be compared to Pontius Pilate? Does the comparison depend on one's view of Billy as a Christ figure, or may it stand alone among the plethora of Christian images found in the story? Support your argument with details from the novel and from Scripture.
13. To what extent does Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* reveal fatalism on the part of the author? In the conflict between free will and determinism, where does Melville stand? In answering the question, consider the role of coincidence and events beyond the control of anyone involved in the story.
14. Is Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* an antiwar novel? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with incidents and quotations from the book.
15. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, what is the significance of the protagonist's speech impediment? Be sure to do more than simply state the function of his stuttering in plot development; consider its thematic importance as well.
16. Discuss the role of mutiny in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. Why is mutiny a particular concern in the historical context in which the novel is set? Be sure to go beyond the mere issue of wartime and consider why the issue was a source of even greater fear among those in authority in 1797, the year in which the story takes place. How does the historical context contribute to the development of the central themes of the novel?
17. To what extent is the *Bellipotent* in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* intended to serve as a metaphor for society at large? Compare and contrast Melville's use of this device in this novel and in his great classic *Moby Dick*, being sure to incorporate specific characters, incidents, and quotations from both books in your analysis.

18. Compare and contrast the villains in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*. What do Claggart and Iago have in common? Consider their reputations, their inner motives and attitudes, and the nature of the plots they concoct. Note that significant differences also exist; be sure not to ignore these.
19. Herman Melville, in both *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, portrays the dangers of monomania - the obsessive focus on a single person or object. Compare and contrast his treatment of the subject in his two greatest works, noting both causes, where such may be discerned, and consequences, both for the obsessed character and for those around him.
20. British Parliamentarian Edmund Burke once said that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Consider the responses of both Billy and the Dansker to the incipient mutiny on board the *Bellipotent* in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and discuss the consequences of their silence in the light of Burke's aphorism. How does the story bear out the truth of Burke's comment?
21. Evaluate the view of reason found in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. Consider especially the role played by reason in the three central characters: Billy, Claggart, and Captain Vere. Does Melville value human reason or question its trustworthiness? Support your answer with quotations from the novel.
22. Discuss the significance of the poem with which Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* ends. What insight does it provide into the major themes of the novel and the author's beliefs with regard to those themes? Be sure to relate specific lines in the poem to thematic issues in the novel as a whole, citing both incidents and quotations in doing so.
23. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, who bears final responsibility for the death of the protagonist? Obviously Billy himself, Claggart, and Captain Vere all play a role, but whom do you consider most accountable for the final outcome? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
24. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the chaplain appears only briefly near the end of the story, but plays a significant role in giving the author's perspective on some of the novel's central themes, particularly those related to religion in general and Christianity in particular. What conclusions can you draw about the author's understanding of religion and/or Christianity from the words and actions of the chaplain on board the *Bellipotent*?
25. In what should be no great surprise to anyone, contemporary critics manage to see a homosexual subtext in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, arguing that Claggart's real motive for destroying Billy is that he desires him and cannot have him. Respond to this interpretation using specific events and quotations from the text.

26. Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* is the last work written by the author, forty years after his masterpiece *Moby Dick*. Both stories deal with the problem of good and evil, and *Billy Budd* represents his mature reflections on the eternal conflict. Consider the treatment of good versus evil in *Billy Budd* and answer one simple question: According to Melville, which ultimately triumphs? Be sure to cite incidents, quotations, and symbolism from the novel in answering the question.
27. In human history, three kinds of law have predominated - divine law, natural law, and civil law. Legal theorists have at different times advocated all three. All three also appear in the deliberations involved in the trial scene and its aftermath in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. While Captain Vere clearly believes that civil law (in this case military law) ought to take precedence in the case before him, the author's opinion is not so easily discerned. Which of the three, in your view, does Melville consider the most important for human happiness and a just society? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
28. Compare and contrast the views of the law found in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Consider what the author conveys, both about the law as a profession and the law as a standard of justice. Are the two stories, written almost forty years apart, in agreement on the subject, or has Melville's critique of law changed or matured over time? Support your conclusion with details and quotations from the two stories.
29. Critic Leon Howard argued that the main lesson of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* is that one must balance the "spontaneous impulses of the heart" with the calm "wisdom of the head" in order to survive in a fallen world. Do you agree or disagree? Support your conclusion with incidents and quotations from the novel.
30. In Matthew 18:3, Jesus told His disciples, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Some critics have argued that Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* was intended to be a picture of the childlike attitude Jesus advocated. Is a character like Billy's really what Jesus had in mind? Why or why not? Compare and contrast the childlike character of Melville's protagonist with the attitude Jesus was advocating in His exhortation to His disciples.
31. Some critics have argued that, because of the fatal flaw in the protagonist's character in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Captain Vere is really more of a Christ figure than Billy. In his combination of head and heart, in his deliberate and painful sacrifice that goes far beyond the one made by Billy himself, and in the foundational goodness that puts the welfare of others before himself, they see in the conflicted Captain values that go far beyond anything that the innocent Billy possesses. Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument with incidents and quotations from the novel.

32. Both Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are stories of voyages that really seek to explore the depths of the human heart. Compare and contrast the views of the heart found in these two stories. Are the two authors in essential agreement about human nature, or do you find significant differences? If so, what are these differences? Be sure to give attention, not only to conclusions drawn by the writers, but also to the techniques they use in presenting those conclusions.
33. In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the story takes place in 1797 and the protagonist is said to be 21 years old. Critic Logan Esdale has noted that Billy, born in 1776, is intended by the author to be a symbol of America, even though the novel involves a British sailor on a British warship during the Napoleonic Wars. What characteristics of the young sailor might be alleged to support such an interpretation? Be sure to give specific evidence from the novel to support your discussion.
34. In his later years, Herman Melville developed a great interest in Buddhism. Some critics have suggested that, though the book is full of biblical allusions and references to Christianity, *Billy Budd* is really a picture of Buddhist resignation in the face of evil, even to the point of death. Use your knowledge of Buddhist teachings, particularly the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the concept of Nirvana to analyze this interpretation of the novel. Either support or refute this approach using specific quotations from Melville's final written work.
35. Some commentators have read Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* as a critique of capital punishment. Though such a concern appears to have been secondary at best in the development of Melville's central themes, to what extent do you believe that the book could be used for such a purpose? What aspects of the story might contribute to an argument against the taking of the life of a lawbreaker by the state?
36. Compare and contrast the protagonists in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. What do these young idealists have in common? Consider their backgrounds, their treatment by their peers, and the circumstances of their deaths. Which is the more admirable character? Why do you think so? Support your conclusions with details from the two novels.