

Billy Budd: The Book as a Whole

1. To what extent can Billy Budd be understood in political terms? Is it a manifesto, a statement of political ideals? Discuss the significance of the fact that Billy Budd was removed from a ship named The Rights of Man.

2. Contrast Billy Budd to Claggart. Billy is handsome and strong; Claggart is sticky and pale. Billy is shown as innocent, naturally good; Claggart is innately evil. Does their relationship imply a reenactment of religious and mythical struggles between natural goodness and the malice of innate evil?

3. What accounts for Claggart's feeling toward Billy? Discuss the passage:

...what can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal, however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself?

4. Does Melville adequately explain Captain Vere's insistence upon an immediate court martial? Is Vere's ostensible motive for punishing Billy credible?

5. Discuss the portrayal of Captain Vere. Is much of what seems to be praise better understood as irony-criticism of Vere and what he represents? Comment on his end: death ashore, drugged with opiates, having "never attained to the fulness of fame".

6. What is the significance of Vere's last words and the fact that they were not spoken with "remorse"?

7. What is the relationship between Billy's speech defect and his character? Does Melville appear to associate innocence with an inability to communicate verbally? Is that logical?

8. Discuss the name symbolism in Billy Budd. Comment on the claims that Melville chose the name "Vere" to suggest truth (Latin: veritas), or manliness (Latin: vir), or departure (veer) from the straight path of justice. Is it equally likely that Melville simply took the name from the popular fiction of the day, as Poe probably did in selecting the name Guy De Vere to use in his poem "Lenore"?

9. Are Billy's famous last words sincere? Ironic? Or does it seem likely that Billy is simply following the custom of the condemned man granting forgiveness to his executioner, an act thought to free the condemned from the sin of hatred before his soul is dispatched to another world?

10. Discuss the Christian significance of the following passages describing Billy's execution and the aftermath:

a. "At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision..."

b. "Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn."

c. "The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some few years kept trace of by the bluejackers...To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross."