

Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*

Interpretive Questions

Is Billy portrayed as a flawed Christ figure or as greater than Christ in his perfect innocence of evil?

1. What is the nature of the "spontaneous homage" which Handsome Sailors like Billy receive? (Chapter 1)
2. Why does Melville imply that Billy's stutter is the work of the devil? (Chapter 2)
3. Does Billy fall from grace when he strikes Claggart dead?
4. Does Billy's cheerfulness in leaving his companions on the *Rights of Man* indicate a lack of human feeling? (Chapter 1)
5. Why can't Billy understand the concepts of salvation and savior? (Chapter 24)
6. Why are Billy's last words "God bless Captain Vere"? Why does the crew echo them? (Chapter 25)
7. Is it goodness that prevents Billy from looking beyond appearances?
8. Why does Melville compare the final meeting between Captain Vere and Billy to a "sacrament"? (Chapter 22)
9. Is it a miracle that no "muscular spasm" occurs when Billy is hanged? (Chapter 26)

Is the execution of Billy Budd a crime in Melville's eyes?

1. Why does Melville have Vere, a man of cultivated intellect, judge between Billy, a man of natural goodness, and Claggart, a man of natural depravity?
2. Why does Captain Vere immediately know that Billy must die? (Chapter 19)
3. Why does Melville suggest that both Claggart and Vere may be insane in their efforts to destroy Billy? (Chapters 11 and 20)
4. Is Vere's secrecy in conducting Billy's trial compatible with justice? (Chapter 21)
5. Are we meant to compare Claggart's minions—his "compliant ones"—with the judges Vere chooses for his drumhead court? (Chapters 8 and 21)
6. Why does Vere suggest to his fellow judges that it is not they who would condemn Billy but "the martial law operating through [them]"? (Chapter 21)
7. Is Melville suggesting that Vere's sacrifice of Billy was warranted by the "mysterious and prodigious" menace posed by the French Revolution? (Chapters 1, 2, 8, 21 and 27)

Why is Captain Vere an "exceptional" character to Melville?

1. Does Vere fail to attain Nelson's "fullness of fame" because his sense of duty outweighs his love of glory? (Chapters 4 and 28)
2. Had he risked mutiny and allowed Billy to live, would Vere then have been as exceptional a commander as Nelson?
3. By emphasizing Vere's pedantry and impatience with "talking," is Melville implying that Vere's knowledge of great books leads him into injustice?
4. Is the "intellectuality" that dominates Claggart the same faculty that rules Vere?
5. Is Vere's cultivated morality as reliable as the spontaneous moral intuition of the "natural man," such as Billy, or the other "mere sailors"?

Does good triumph over evil when Billy kills Claggart?

1. Why does Billy's reflex to strike out at envious enemies work to his advantage on the *Rights of Man*, yet cause his downfall on the *Bellipotent*? (Chapters 1, 12 and 19)
2. Why is there a touch of soft yearning in Claggart's hatred of Billy? (Chapter 17)
3. Why is the evil in Claggart portrayed as intellectually superior to the good in Billy? (Chapters 11, 12 and 16)
4. Why isn't the Dansker able to help Billy—if he has both knowledge of the world and knowledge of human nature? (Chapters 9 and 15)
5. Why does knowledge of the world blunt the finer spiritual insight that's needed to understand exceptional good or evil? (Chapter 11)
6. Why does Melville excuse the vices of sailors as "frank manifestations in accordance with natural law"? (Chapters 2 and 16)
7. Why does Melville conclude his "inside narrative" with a false official account of Billy's story and a simple sailor's ballad memorializing him? (Chapters 29 and 30)

Evaluative Questions

1. Is the average person incapable of recognizing evil when it hides behind rational methods? (Chapter 11)
2. Should we trust our instinctive moral responses or does morality depend on use of reason?
3. Can normal people fathom "the mystery of iniquity" by looking within themselves? (Chapters 11 and 21)
4. If heroism is but "vainglory" and needless expenditure of life, why do we spontaneously acclaim it in great epics and drama? (Chapter 4)
5. In entering the military, do we cease to be free moral agents, as Vere asserts? (Chapter 21)