

Billy Budd: Movie Viewing Guide

1. The captain of the merchant ship *Rights of Man* tries to outrun the warship, pretends he cannot hear the orders coming from the warship, and sends Billy aloft in an effort to hide him. What are his reasons for doing this?
2. As Billy is being rowed from the merchant ship to the man of war, he calls out, "Goodbye, old *Rights of Man*." The naval officer in the row boat responds with anger and asks Billy what he means by this. Billy says that he means nothing. He is just saying goodbye. What irony is there in Billy's salute to the merchant vessel as he is rowed toward *The Avenger*? What type of irony is this?
3. What do we learn about Billy in his interview with the officer as he signs on to his new ship?
4. What troubled Billy about the lashing he witnessed aboard the ship?
5. Compare Claggart's costume to the clothing worn by the other characters. How does Claggart's costume add to characterization?
6. It becomes apparent that Billy has a flaw. What is it?
7. When Billy leaves his post to try to help Jenkins, the man tells Billy, "For the love of God, Billy, look to yourself." What does Jenkins mean and what literary device is being used by the screenwriter through this statement?
8. After Jenkins falls from the spar and dies, Claggart lies about how it happened. Captain Vere then asks the men, "You were his mess mates, does anyone here know how this occurred?" They are silent. What does this silence tell us about the men?
9. After Kincaid yells out to Claggart, "Damn your bloody eyes," and is sent to the brig to await his punishment, Captain Vere orders the ship to begin firing at a French vessel that is out of range. What purpose is served by this action?
10. Captain Vere gives a speech after Kincaid has cursed Claggart. What do we learn from this monologue?

11. When Claggart and Captain Vere discuss the question of how many lashes Kincaid should be given for cursing an officer, Claggart makes the point that the law must be served or those in authority must give up the right of service. How does this argument relate to the central question posed by this story? What are the arguments for this proposition?
12. When Claggart and Captain Vere discuss the question of how many lashes Kincaid is to be given for cursing an officer, the Captain states that “behind every peacemaker is the gun, the jail, the gallows” and that “even the man who wields the whip cannot defy the code we must obey.” How does this statement relate to later events in the story?
13. When Lt. Seymour questions Captain Vere about Claggart, the Captain says that he will give Claggart his head and let the law consume him. What point is being made here?
14. On deck at night, Billy and Claggart talk. What does Billy say that threatens Claggart? What about Billy’s statement does Claggart find threatening? Billy prevents Kincaid from murdering Claggart. What is the irony in this incident?
15. What can the audience read on Claggart’s face as he dies?
16. In conversation with Lt. Seymour, Captain Vere makes an important point about what happens to justice when a military unit must prepare for battle. Is his point valid?
17. When The Dansker is questioned in Captain Vere’s quarters, he makes a point about what fear in the face of authority does to people. What does he say?
18. At the court martial, name some of the arguments that are brought up in defense of Billy. Are the points valid?
19. What arguments does Captain Vere use to convince the jury of officers to condemn Billy? What do we learn about innocence from the manner in which Billy hears the news that he is to die and from his last words before his hanging?
20. When Billy is awakened on the morning of his day to die, he is curled in bed in a child-like pose. He puts on a fancy pair of shoes, polished and new; he appears to be going to his death as if he were going to church. Billy looks in the eyes of every officer who had condemned him. He feels no regret, shame or anger. What does this show about Billy Budd?