

Booknotes for Billy Budd

Authorial Background:

Herman Melville was born on August 1, 1819 in New York City, and died in 1891. He was the heir to the great tradition of romantic literature, he wrote realistically of life at sea, and became a popular storyteller who responded to the cultural conflicts of the mid nineteenth century. His father had been a well-to-do importer whose business was severely damaged by the scarcity of foreign exchange during America's first postwar depression. After 11 years of struggle, his father, his mother Maria Gansevoort Melville, and seven other children moved to Albany. There, he attended the Academy for two short years of formal education before his father's death in 1832 forced him to find employment in a bank. He was an elementary schoolteacher and embarked on a literary career. In the summer of 1839 he made a trial voyage to Liverpool as a merchant sailor. He later joined a whaling voyage to the South Pacific. He was free and adventurous, a sturdy, energetic young man of 5'9" and a half with twinkling blue eyes and waving brown hair. From his years of whaling travels, the events he witnessed set the basic frame for all his travel romances, which include Typee (1846), Omoo (1847), the allegorical Mardi (1849), Redburn (1849), White Jacket (1850), his masterpiece, Moby-Dick (1851), and a later short story, Billy Budd (1891). Later, he gave up writing after his manuscripts sold poorly, and served twenty years as a New York customs inspector.

Literary Period / Country:

Modern contemporary, United States

Setting:

Billy Budd took place aboard the British warship the Indomitable, during the aftermath of mutiny and the French Revolution. The entire story takes place mostly at sea; however, the sea is rarely mentioned. The Indomitable is divided mysteriously into "upper" and "lower" decks, where cooperation or mischief may take place.

Characters:

Billy Budd: Billy was a young, handsome, innocent sailor who was afraid to express himself. His physical features and manners made him seem angelic, but he was in the center of envy and disgust. Because of Claggart's belief that he was mutinous, he hit Claggart and accidentally killed him; he was later tried, convicted of murder, and hanged.

James Claggart: he is an envious man, the master-at-arms, who accuses Billy of mutiny and various degrees of wrongdoing. His evil is innate and firmly rooted; he envies Billy and is disgusted by his plain innocence and boyish beauty. He wants to charge Billy for mutiny to take away his happiness and becomes more malicious. At the end, he dies as Billy punches him and breaks his neck.

Captain Vere: Vere is Billy's thoughtful "father" and mentor. He speaks eloquently with the best of English grammar and manner; he is prudent and valiant in times of war. He was a wise and good man who loved Billy as a son but forced a reluctant court to condemn him to death. In dilemmas between war and peacetime affairs, he was motivated to do the right thing by military

law. He talked privately with Billy to such effect that Billy died with the words “God bless Captain Vere” on his lips. However, Captain Vere was not blessed. He was haunted. He himself died murmuring the words, though not remorsefully when killed in the war, “Billy Budd, Billy Budd.”

Theme:

Melville believes that the world was too far complex to be pictured in black and white. Good and evil may exist side by side, as he exemplifies in the almost allegorical exaggeration of these qualities in Claggart and Billy. A few basic themes in Billy Budd are good against evil, right against wrong, and mutiny over authority. Is man social and responsible for the social welfare of his society, or is he an independent moral individual responsible to himself and his values alone?

Another important theme is that mankind can never be perfect. Billy Budd was the epitome of male beauty, but he possessed inarticulate speech and stuttered as he spoke. He was too perfect that his peers envied him, and provoked Claggart’s death. Although his life could have been idyllic, his life was cut short by the murder of Claggart and his subsequent hanging. Also, a theme expressing the effects of envy abound throughout the book. Claggart embodies the most pernicious envy, without reason, and finds nothing pleasurable in Billy’s personality and features.

Plot Summary:

Billy Budd transfers from the ship The Rights to the Indomitable during the course of the French Revolution. The young, innocent sailor representative of all perfect human values, was falsely accused by a direly envious master-of-arms named Claggart. Claggart accuses Billy of conspiring mutiny, but Billy cannot speak up for himself. When he is faced between his caretaker Captain Vere and Claggart, he punched Claggart in a furor of inexpressible anger and accidentally broke his neck. This major but accidental crime against naval and moral doctrine brings on a trial for murder and the sentence to death by hanging. Billy’s shipmates pity him, recognizing the innocence of his motive. It was Captain Vere, Billy’s trusted caretaker, who ordered and supported Billy’s death penalty; later, Billy was hung.

Author’s Unique Style:

Melville writes Billy Budd in prose but adds a sentimental ballad (lyric poem), or a narrative poem carrying much emotion, at the end of the story. His diction is rich and allusive, alluding to symbolic concepts as the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the French Revolution. The story’s plot is based on an allegorical foundation, using the three characters Billy, Claggart, and Captain Vere to demonstrate the intricate nature of human fault and envy. Melville’s point of view in third person omniscient allows the reader to sample each of the three main characters’ thoughts at the same time. Most of all, Melville does not write dramatically or overemphatically. He explains Billy’s story realistically, with no exaggerations or outright showing of emotion. His technique for creating his somber tone is subtle and reserved.

Quotes:

1. “God bless Captain Vere!” even though Billy is about to die, he does not blame Captain Vere for his death although it was he who sentenced him to it; instead, he remembers Vere’s fatherly behavior and friendship towards him.

2. “Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang.” This was Captain Vere’s opinion of Billy in light of his naval discipline.
3. Both “[t]he simple flowerets. . . open their infant buttons” and “a custom--house officer in his brass--buttoned jacket” shows the intensity to which Captain Vere had prized Billy. He symbolizes Vere’s button, being a glimmer of light upon his coat.
4. “Their knowledge followed it. . . still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere dockyard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross.” The shipworkers’ actions exemplify the effect Billy had on people’s lives.
5. “. . . the ringleader was one William Budd, he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning the man before the captain was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd.” This explains the tendency of people to lie where there is no further information given, and the reality of distorting the truth.

Glossary:

1. **Diction:** word choice. Diction is chosen according to the tone the author wishes to convey; diction can be formal or informal, powerful or flaccid: “evanescence”, “inmitigable,” “pinching,” “shriveling,” and “momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut” all evoke a feeling of fleeting time and enclosed space.
2. **Simile:** a comparison between two unlike things using like, as, than, seems, or appears: “But upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter a red light would [flash] forth from his eye like a spark from an anvil in a dark smithy.”
3. **Allusion:** a reference to something well-known or famous in previous literature or history. A few allusions given in Billy Budd are the French Revolution, Jesus Christ, and the Bible.
4. **Symbolism:** any object or event that suggests other meanings than itself. Billy Budd is described as Adam and Christ; Billy’s features, perfection, and innocence symbolize both persons.
5. **Sentimental ballad / lyric poem:** a narrative poem carrying lyrical stanzas that evoke heavy feelings. The only lyric poem found in Billy Budd is “Billy in the Darbies,” which is the final words of the book.

4/26/01 (found later):

Authorial Background (including reasons for writing the work):

In New York, 1819, Herman Melville was born. His merchant father’s bankruptcy and death in 1832 deprived him of a career and an optimistic view of life. He was a schoolteacher, sailed to Liverpool before the mast, then shipped on a Pacific whaling voyage where he encountered various peoples and events before he sailed home. From his adventures at sea came his popular but increasingly imaginative travel romances: Typee (1846), Omoo (1847), Mardi (1849), Redburn (1849), White-Jacket (1850), and his masterpiece, Moby-Dick (1851). The author married in 1847, living in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. His later fictional works were not sea romances, selling poorly. Giving up professional writing and having served twenty years as a New York customs inspector, Melville died in 1891. Billy Budd, Sailor, a short novel written in Melville’s last years, was published for the first time in 1924 on the crest of a long revival that has placed him among the greatest American writers.