

# **Billy Budd Book Notes**

## **Billy Budd by Herman Melville**

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## Author/Context

Herman Melville was born August 1, 1819, to a wealthy merchant family in New York City. His family was as close to aristocracy as the young nation possessed (his paternal grandfather had participated in the Boston Tea Party). Melville was the third of many children in the family. When his father went bankrupt and died soon after, his older brothers took over the household. Because of these financial drawbacks, Melville ended up working at a bank at a young age and then on a farm with his uncle. In 1839, while he was studying to enter a job on the Erie canal, he published his first compositions. For the next decade, he went to sea on various voyages, the longest being several years. During this time he was inspired to write down his observations and experiences. His first book, *Typee*, was published in the summer of 1846, and his second book followed the next year. He married soon after this and had a child within a couple of years. After some financial troubles he returned to New York to live. For many years after this, depression and illness prevented him from any serious work. He worked on *Billy Budd* in the later years of his life and died in 1891 leaving it in a tin box, unpublished. At his death, Melville was nearly unknown as a writer.

Melville is remembered chiefly for his work *Moby Dick*, written as a combination of his experiences. This book, published in 1851 after two years of work, was received well by some critics, but coolly by most. He was a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who praised *Moby Dick* as Melville's greatest accomplishment. Hawthorne and Melville were associates for many years, often reviewing and editing each other's works.

Melville's works endured after the turn of the century mainly because of *Moby Dick*. The lengthy epic about one man's insane hunt for the great white whale had been a cornerstone of American literature for the past hundred years. Its elaborate descriptions of whaling and in depth religious allusions have marked it as an indispensable part of American heritage.

*Billy Budd* is the last work of significance by Melville. His cousin had proceeded over the court-martial and hanging of a man in the U.S. Navy. Right before he was executed, the man yelled a blessing to the American flag. Details from this event inspired the increasingly religious Melville later in his life to write *Billy Budd*. The novel was first published in 1924, a generation after his death. Found by a scholar, this work was immediately praised as second only to *Moby Dick*. Biographer David Kirby says, "*Billy Budd* also anticipates modernism in its form, its collage of genres, and its open-endedness." Biographer Tyrus Hillway adds, "With stunning brilliance it throws the pure beam of its lightning - if only for an instant - upon the warp and woof of human existence."

Along with Twain and Hawthorne, Melville marks the advent of the American novel. He also occupies a post as a founder of American individualism and intellectualism along with Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau. In this era of authors, we see the American language and value system codified in literature. These authors set the convention for American novelists well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century writing novels about Americans in America.



This tradition endures in schools and libraries today. Although Melville was called crazy in his day, Kirby asserts that "In the present day, given the richness, subtlety, and balance of Melville's vision, one might say there were few as sane as he was and, given the challenges he face[d], as brave."

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# Plot Summary

The merchant sailor, Billy Budd, is inspected and enlisted for naval service on the *Bellipotent*. Although his civilian captain is not happy to see him go, he has to release him to the navy. Billy is a wonderful sailor. All the other sailors like him for his charming looks and honest simple personality. He waves good-bye to his shipmates as he is taken aboard his new ship.

Billy does well in his new surroundings. The other sailors like him as much as he was liked on the merchant vessel. He works in the topsails and makes fast friends with his companions and a veteran sailor, referred to as the Dansker.

The captain of the ship is Fairfax Vere. Captain Vere is a very stern man. He is well-read and educated and he speaks often in historical allusions. Many find him to be less than personable and he is not popular with the sailors, although he is respected.

There is a new master-at-arms on the ship and his name is John Claggart. The job of the master-at-arms has turned into policing his own crew. He is primarily responsible for watching over the men. In recent months there have been mutinies on British ships, so the officers are ill-at-ease. Claggart's job is more difficult as a result of this.

One of the corporals tells Claggart that Billy Budd was ridiculing him. Claggart takes offense at this lie and begins to watch Billy carefully, counterfeiting pleasant hellos. When Billy finds out from the veteran sailor that Claggart doesn't like him, he doesn't believe it.

After the pursuit of an enemy ship, Claggart goes to captain Vere and tells him that he thinks one of the men is dangerous, liable to mutiny. When he tells him that he means Billy Budd, the captain doesn't believe him. He takes Billy and Claggart into a room and makes Claggart accuse Billy to his face. Billy is stunned by the accusation and when pressured to talk, he punches Claggart in the forehead. This punch hit just right and kills the master-at-arms.

Captain Vere is at first confused, but he calls a court of other officers to review the crime and set a sentence. Although some of them feel that Billy unintentionally committed a crime, Captain Vere maintains that on a warship a murder is a murder regardless of intention. They convict Billy and sentence him to hang at dawn.

At dawn, all the men assemble and Billy is hung by the main mast. The sun rises on his body framed by the mast and the yardarm. Some men think that he seemed to die before the noose tightened. Although an official report stated that Billy stabbed Claggart after he was rightly accused, the truth of his execution lived on in a ballad sung by sailors all over the world.



# Major Characters

**Billy Budd:** The protagonist of this short story, Billy is an amalgamation of many heroic traits. He is handsome and his morality is pure. Although he does not possess the high philosophical morality of Captain Vere, he is honest and true. His magnetic personality has the capacity to enchant fellow men. He unites the crew of the Rights-of-Man and the Bellipotent. This positive energy, however, attracts enemies like John Claggart. Billy's simple intellect and his tendency to stutter in stressful situations combined with his moral outrage at Claggart's accusations causes him to punch Claggart resulting in an unintentional death. Billy's execution is a sort of martyrdom. It is best put in the words of Captain Vere: 'Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!' (Chapter 19, page 478)

**Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere:** Captain Vere is a different sort of moral force in this text. He is the philosopher. His experience at sea and within the confines of literature and learning has made him concerned with the subtle nuances of right and wrong. It is his conviction that naval law, which requires Billy's execution, be adhered to. Ironically, he is sorrowful that Billy must be executed, yet he is unwilling to compromise his beliefs or the law. While other men in the court waver, he is solid in his conviction giving the other's time to work out their solution.

**John Claggart:** Claggart is the antagonist. He is not an ugly man, but his looks do not have the rugged purity of Billy's. He seems to be intellectual, although he does not possess the philosophical morality of Captain Vere. He is cold and calculating. As a late member of the navy, he must work hard and carefully, if not deviously, to rise in the ranks. As master-at-arms, he is the policeman of the ship. He has no problem with Billy, until he is told, falsely, that Billy has been ridiculing him. He responds with a disproportionate hatred that drives him to accuse Billy of mutiny. Billy responds by punching him. Claggart dies as a result of his own hatred.

## Minor Characters

**Lieutenant Radcliffe:** Naval officer from the H.M.A. Bellipotent who inspected and approved Billy Budd for mandatory enlistment into the British navy. He is moderately stern, but amused when Billy stands in the skiff and waves good-bye to his merchant sailor friends. After Radcliffe's initial appearance in the story, he disappears.

**Captain Graveling:** Captain of the merchant ship the Rights-of-Man. He is unhappy when Billy is called up for service. He knows that Billy was his best sailor, the peacemaker of the crew.

**Red Whiskers:** Sailor aboard the Rights-of-Man who dislikes Billy. He was the lead sailor before Billy arrived and is likely to be again after he leaves.

**Admiral Nelson:** Although not pictured in this story, Admiral Nelson makes a lasting impression throughout it. He is a contemporary British admiral whose reputation is that



of a divine hero. He was instrumental in dealing with the mutinies of the same year. His example is omnipresent for Captain Vere.

**Grizzled man:** The one who approaches the Dansker and tells him that John Claggart dislikes Billy Budd. He also happens to be the corporal who tells Claggart that Billy Budd has been ridiculing him among the sailors. The grizzled man is the instigator of all the troubles between Billy and the master-at-arms.

**The Dansker:** A veteran sailor who has served with Admiral Nelson; his name among the Bellipotent's crew is Board-Her-in-the-Smoke. He is as much of a father figure as the orphan Billy has had. Although he hesitates to give advice, he is always around to warn Billy. He is the first person to make Billy aware of Claggart's increasing disapproval.

**Surgeon:** The surgeon verified the death of John Claggart. His reaction to Captain Vere's orders for the murder is the first indication of strife between the Captain and his officers. The surgeon thinks that the trial should be left until they return to the fleet.

**First lieutenant:** Another of the officers at the drumhead court, the first lieutenant is also the second in command of the ship. When the Captain is unable to serve, the first lieutenant is in charge.

**Captain of the marines:** A parallel authority on the ship, the captain of the marines is under Captain Vere's authority because he is serving on his ship. The captain of the marines does not want to convict Billy because he thinks that he had no intention of killing Claggart.

**Sailing master:** An officer at the drumhead court, the sailing master is in charge of the daily management of sailing.



## Objects/Places

**Handsome sailor:** Term used by Melville for a sailor of Billy's type. The Handsome sailor is not only good looking, but he is articulate and talented. He can hunt and fish and hold his own in a fight. He is a leader of his companions. This type of sailor began to disappear with the advent of the steamship.

**H.M.A. Bellipotent 74:** The naval ship to which Billy is transferred upon his enlistment in the navy. The Bellipotent is larger than a frigate and captained by a stern and experienced leader.

**Rights-of-Man:** The merchant ship from which Billy was transferred to the Bellipotent. On the Rights-of-Man he enjoyed extreme popularity with the crew and the captain.

**Nore Mutiny:** A mutiny where the sailors, inspired by the French Revolution, overthrew their officers and tried to make negotiations for better treatment. This resulted in new recruits and the marines being called up. The mutiny was put down, but it left a lasting scar on officers and sailors alike.

**Theseus:** Ship piloted by Admiral Nelson. Also the mythical Athenian figure who navigated the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne and killed the minotaur.

**Master-at-Arms:** The position on the Bellipotent held by John Claggart. This position used to be held by an officer who would instruct men in the use of swords. With the advent of firearms, however, it became more a mission of policing the sailors.

**Guineas:** The largest denomination of English money. At this time and especially on the sea, two gold guineas would be very hard to find.

**Frigates:** Small and faster naval ships.

**Mutiny:** When a crew rebels against their captain and takes control of the ship. The fear is omnipresent for the officers in this story. Mutinies have happened twice in the British navy right before the time of this story.

**Drumhead court:** An informal naval court at sea. When a crime is committed, the Captain selects senior officers to try the criminal and set a sentence.

**Athee:** (The Atheist) The French ship that the Bellipotent runs into at the end of the story. This encounter results in the death of Captain Vere.

**Agamemnon:** The ship on which the Dansker served with Admiral Nelson.



## Quotes

Quote 1: "on shore he was a champion; afloat the spokesman; on every suitable occasion always foremost." Chapter 1, pg. 431

Quote 2: "[B]lessed are the peacemakers" Chapter 1, pg. 434

Quote 3: "And it may be that he rather liked this adventurous turn in his affairs, which promised an opening into novel scenes and martial excitements." Chapter 1, pg. 435

Quote 4: "[an] upright barbarian" Chapter 2, pg. 438

Quote 5: "When it did, the lieutenants assigned to batteries felt it incumbent on them, in some instances, to stand with drawn swords behind the men working the guns." Chapter 5, pg. 444

Quote 6: "Jemmy Legs!...What for? Why, he calls me 'the sweet and pleasant young fellow' they tell me." Chapter 9, pg. 453

Quote 7: "For 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?" Chapter 11, pg. 456

Quote 8: "But after the little matter at the mess Billy Budd no more found himself in strange trouble at times about his hammock or his clothes bag or what not. As to that smile that occasionally sunned him, and the pleasant passing word, these were, if not more frequent, yet if anything more pronounced than before." Chapter 17, pg. 467

Quote 9: "heed what you speak. Just now, and in a case like this, there is a yardarm-end for the false witness." Chapter 18, pg. 474

Quote 10: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Chapter 19, pg. 478

Quote 11: "Captain Vere tells the truth. It is just as Captain Vere says, but it is not as the master-at-arms said. I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King." Chapter 21, pg. 482

Quote 12: "Out of natural courtesy he received, but did not appropriate. It was like a gift placed in the palm of an outreached hand upon which the fingers do not close." Chapter 24, pg. 495

Quote 13: "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 Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn." Chapter 25, pg. 497

Quote 14: "With mankind,...forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood." Chapter 27, pg. 501



## Topic Tracking: Historical Context

Historical Context 1: This story finds the British navy at a critical juncture in its development. In recent years, there have been many significant milestones in the development of the Empire. With the fall of the French monarchy and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Britain has become the eminent imperial presence not only in the Americas but also in Africa, Australia, India and the Far East. These territories stretched the British navy beyond its capacity. The complications of governing and controlling such a large empire eventually led to its decline.

Historical Context 2: The British navy begins its decline around this period in time. These mutinies are not the cause of this, but they are an indicator of it. The British empire expanded exponentially in a rather short period of time. This expansion required a much larger navy from the same size population. These new requirements caused the navy to be filled with less than desirable sailors, and these sailors were worked harder than before. All of these factors combined to cause dissatisfaction that culminated in mutinies and violent reactions. The atmosphere of the American and French Revolutions added to these problems. All over the world, monarchical authority was being overthrown.

Historical Context 3: The problem of authority and mutiny was complicated by changes in technology. Firearms were becoming more important and ships were becoming faster and more dangerous. Increased power was frequently put in the hands of a single person. The strife between officers and the enlisted, always a class struggle in the British navy, became more dangerous.

Historical Context 4: Because the Empire grew so quickly, manpower wasn't the only shrinking resource. It was difficult for the British to build and pay for enough ships to patrol their holdings all over the world. This shortage forced admirals to commission ships to duties they were not built for.

Historical Context 5: Before writing this story, Melville's cousin preceded over a court-martial at sea in the American navy. Three men were hanged on the ship for conspiracy to mutiny. Melville has the officers on the *Bellipotent* reflect on this event. The sternness of the British navy of this period is, in part, ironic. The British empire was created in part by pirates. The royal commission offered money to privateers to raid and sack French and Spanish ships and settlements in the New World. These privateers eventually became part of the fleet that destroyed the formidable Spanish Armada.

Historical Context 6: Melville admits that there are two kinds of history. The first is the official history. Naval officials record Billy as a criminal rightly put to death. The second kind of history is the people's history. Billy is rightly remembered in the songs of many sailors who will surely never read the official report.



## Topic Tracking: Morality

Morality 1: Billy's morality is simple and honest--the author says this often. What is implied, however, is the depth of this innocence. Billy does not struggle with the naval officer enlisting him, because this is his duty. Although he might not want to go into the navy, he goes anyway and he tries to do well once he gets there.

Morality 2: Captain Vere is an intellectual; he is also mistaken for a gentleman. His ideas of morality and right and wrong are heavily influenced by this. He thinks in terms of historical allusion. Right and wrong are not contextual for him, they are static.

Morality 3: Billy's moral system is such that when he hears Claggart doesn't like him he is stunned. He cannot imagine that someone would pretend they would like him but secretly dislike him. He is innocent and simple.

Morality 4: Claggart, a cold and calculating man, is overcome by a hatred for one man. In this, there is no right or wrong for him. Any treatment of Billy, regardless of what it results in, is a means to an end, an expression of his natural depravity. He thinks that Billy doesn't like him, therefore, he should not like Billy. Since he doesn't like Billy, he intends to ruin him.

Morality 5: While Billy is still unable to accept that someone who seems to like him really dislikes him, Claggart is carefully watching him and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. He sees nothing wrong with this. Billy on the other hand sees something so wrong with counterfeiting the way you feel about someone that he doesn't believe it.

Morality 6: The captain has nothing but positive impressions from Billy Budd, but he cannot dismiss the claims of one of his officers. He does not know Claggart very well, since he is a new addition to the crew. Instead of making a bad decision he decides to hear both sides of the story and test both the sailor and the officer.

Morality 7: The ideals behind the conviction of Billy are tangled and complex. There are two clashing sets of morality. The first is very philosophical: Billy did not intend to kill Claggart; he reacted with passion. The second is authoritarian: killing is wrong; Billy killed. Captain Vere enforces the authoritarian morality because they are in the navy. There is nothing more important than authority in the armed forces. This is the thinking behind Captain Vere's convictions. His officers are upset because they know intuitively that Billy did nothing intentionally. His heart is still pure.



## Topic Tracking: Religion

Religion 1: This is the first allusion to Christ in the story. Billy is a honest and pure man liked by everyone; he is called a peacemaker. The lieutenant finds humor in this and he makes an allusion to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Billy is incapable of making this change in his life, but he peacefully goes along with it. He does not struggle.

Religion 2: This section, where the man in the shadows tempts Billy, may be understood as an allusion to Jesus' tempting by the devil. At its most basic level, it is the temptation of the innocent with worldly goods. Billy is so innocent that he does not understand what is going on. He is dumbfounded.

Religion 3: Billy seems to have no need for the priest. He is not afraid of his own death. The idea of a frightening death that the priest is attempting to instill means nothing to Billy. He is innocent and he has nothing to fear. For him death is little different than his transfer from the merchant ship to the *Bellipotent*. The tone of the text is dismissive of religion. Although the text is very spiritual and centralized around morality, it is a morality between man and God rather than man and priest.

Religion 4: Billy's execution is a martyrdom. He is an innocent who dies for the sake of an evil (Claggart). He takes the evil away with his own hands, but must die to cleanse the rest of the ship from this crime. He doesn't complain, he accepts it. When he dies, he is so accepting that he blesses the very man who convicted him. Melville's text is full of religious language alluding to the ascension.

Even more remarkable is the symbolism of where Billy Budd was hanged. When Captain Vere makes the unavoidable decision to hang Billy, he chooses to hang him from the middle mast of the ship, contrary to normal hangings which are done on any of the other masts. This is the book's strongest allusion pertaining to Jesus Christ, for he too was put to death on the middle "cross."

Religion 5: It seems that Billy may have died before he suffered the pain of hanging. This is a parallel to the crucifixion. After so much time on the cross, God allegedly took Jesus Christ's life, freeing him from pain. Billy dies without the pain of hanging. His story becomes immortalized just as the martyrdom of Christ.



## Part 1, Chapter 1

Before the advent of steamships, there were merchant sailors who seemed to be a 'higher' and somehow more regal member of their class. Unlike on land, shipmates of all colors mixed in companionship. Of these types the handsome sailor type has become all but extinct on the steamships. He was proficient in his art like a boxer or a wrestler, "on shore he was a champion; afloat the spokesman; on every suitable occasion always foremost." Chapter 1, pg. 431. He was a sailor and a hunter; his morality was as keen as his character. Of such a sort is Billy Budd. He is sailing after the American Revolution and at the beginning of the French Revolution, in 1797. The British Empire is at its greatest extent; its navy patrols almost every ocean near all the major continents.

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 1

The H.M.A. *Bellipotent* 74 is short of its necessary crew, so by naval order Lieutenant Radcliffe boards the merchant ship, the *Rights-of-Man*, to inspect Billy for military service. Billy doesn't try to avoid the lieutenant and he makes no objections. The master of the ship gives him a look of reproach, but says nothing. Captain Graveling, a man who rarely sleeps on a voyage, does not want the lieutenant to take Billy away because he holds his crew together. Billy has become a leader and an inspiration to the rest of the crew. The old head of the crew, Red Whiskers, did not like Billy because he was jealous of him. Once he tried to punch Billy and got pummeled himself. Anyone on the ship would do anything for Billy and the lieutenant quips: "blessed are the peacemakers" Chapter 1, pg. 434. He reminds the captain that the royal commissioners will be grateful if he gives up Billy willingly. Billy enters with his possessions in a chest, but the Lieutenant tells him to put all his stuff in a bag because there is no room for chests on a naval ship. As they row to the naval vessel, Billy stands up to wave, a breach of naval protocol. Not only is one required to sit in a boat, but a member of the navy is supposed to act with more restraint. The lieutenant stifles his laughter. Billy is ambivalent about his enlistment:

*"And it may be that he rather liked this adventurous turn in his affairs, which promised an opening into novel scenes and martial excitements."* Chapter 1, pg. 435

Topic Tracking: Religion 1

On the *Bellipotent* he is liked; many of the men seem jovial, but are actually sullen. Life in the navy is hard and they are overworked. Many of them miss their wives and children. Billy is a foretopman, working in the sails. Unlike the other men, Billy doesn't have a family to worry about.



## Chapters 2 & 3

Billy is well received on the military vessel, but it is not as it was on the merchant ship. He looks younger than he is and does not fall into the jealousy of the other sailors: he is like the country mouse in the city. When asked, he says that he does not know his place of birth or parents, but he was found in a silk-lined basket in Bristol. An officer remarks that he was a good find. Billy is illiterate and knows the world only as a giant ocean with a series of ports and beaches. He is not without vice, but he is not vindictive. As the author interjects, he is little more than "[an] upright barbarian" Chapter 2, pg. 438. Billy, although he seems to be without blemish, stutters when he gets upset. He is imperfect in an imperfect world.

Topic Tracking: Morality 1

### Chapter 3

The ship is on its way to the Mediterranean. It is 1797, and during this year there have been mutinies which make the British empire nervous. Some of this was ignited by the fervor of the French Revolution. British naval historians often ignore the Nore mutiny and the Great mutiny. The first was violently put down and the second, although negotiated at the beginning, met the same end. Naval victories after these mutinies overshadow their significance.

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 2



## Chapters 4 & 5

Inventions have altered sea warfare; newer ships lack the symmetry of the great old war ships. Admiral Nelson won the battle of Trafalgar and was wounded. He wrote his last will before he died and his second in command lost the fleet in shipwreck. Such events weigh heavily on the mind of British navy officers.

### Chapter 5

The British naval mutinies were put down but the grievances were not addressed. The fleet, because it was overly large, had to be maintained in any way possible. Nelson switched his flag ship to the *Theseus* to win the loyalty of new recruits. It worked for a while, but sometimes men still resisted orders:

*"When it did, the lieutenants assigned to batteries felt it incumbent on them, in some instances, to stand with drawn swords behind the men working the guns."* Chapter 5, pg. 444

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 3



## Chapters 6 & 7

News of these mutinies had reached every ship in the British navy. On many ships, this news created unrest. On the *Bellipotent*, however, it seems that mutinies were not a recent occurrence. Part of this was due to the sternness of the Captain. Captain Vere is a longtime sailor and bachelor who is very stern but knowledgeable. On shore he speaks like a gentleman who some might confuse for a royal guest. Vere is described with a certain reverence. He is mysterious, yet not in a devious fashion. He is depicted in stark contrast to Billy. Billy is simple and good. Vere is calculating and educated, although he is also predisposed towards good deeds. Their goodness, however, is very different. For his humble demeanor he is known as 'starry Vere' from the Andrew Marvel poem 'Appleton House'. This name was originally given to him in a battle he fought alongside Admiral Nelson. The epithet became attached to his surname and other Veres in the navy are called the same.

### Chapter 7

Besides being a sea captain, Vere is an exceptional man. He leans toward everything intellectual and loves reading, especially history and biography. He has very solid convictions against innovation and change because they threaten the order he loves. He has watched the rise of British power and, with the mutinies, probably fears its decline. He likes order. When he speaks he often uses historical allusion. Others find him less than companionable because of these qualities.

Topic Tracking: Morality 2



## Chapters 8 & 9

The master-at-arms of the *Bellipotent* is John Claggart. Before the days of gunpowder, the master instructed men in the art of swords and sabers. Now he has become a sort of military policeman. Claggart is thirty-five and tall, looking too noble to do hard work. He has curly hair and an amber-hued complexion. Rumor has it that he is a criminal hiding from British royal authorities. At the time, police were liable to take well-bodied convicts and put them aboard a departing ship. Debtors also found the navy to be a safe haven. Often a ship's crew would be filled out by a release from the local prison. Talk about Claggart, however, may be dismissed because the master-at-arms is never liked. He is much like the modern day military police. No one trusts him, especially since he is a new officer on the *Bellipotent*. Claggart entered the navy late in life and even though he started in the lower ranks, he rose quickly. He commands the corporals, they do his bidding. Claggart is very interested in gaining rank.

### Chapter 9

Billy likes life in the foretop where they behave like an aerial lounging club. He sees a man severely whipped for not being at his post and is terrified. He is very careful not to make mistakes, but gets threatened for minor infractions like putting his bag away in the wrong place. There is an older veteran called the Dansker who sailed on Nelson's ship, *Agamemnon*. When he first saw Billy, he took to him immediately. He is a mastman and he calls Billy, 'Baby.' The Grizzled man is telling him a story when Billy gets off duty. The Dansker comes up to him and tells him that the master-at-arms has taken a dislike to him. Billy exclaims: "Jemmy Legs!...What for? Why, he calls me 'the sweet and pleasant young fellow' they tell me." Chapter 9, pg. 453. He tells Billy that Claggart has a sweet voice and is always nice to him because he doesn't like him.

Topic Tracking: Morality 3



## Chapters 10 & 11

There is an incident the following day during lunch. While they are eating the ship lurches and Billy spills his soup just as Claggart walks by. Claggart muses that this was done 'handsomely.' Others do not think that Claggart dislikes Billy. It seems to them that this comment was a playful use of his nickname 'handsome sailor'. Billy believes this, even though the Dansker thinks otherwise.

### Chapter 11

Billy wonders why the master-at-arms would hate him. The author interjects that it would be easy to invent some pre-story reason if the book were a romance:

*"For 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?"* Chapter 11, pg. 456

On the ship every man runs into every other man every day of the week. It is hard to avoid someone who annoys you. The nature of men is described as often having a natural depravity that is hidden inside respectability. This depravity is seen most often in well-adjusted men. The sanest men have certain moments of unexplained lunacy. Claggart is one of these men. Although he looks and seems normal, if not just a little odd, he has an undetectable predisposition towards limited insanity.

## Chapters 12, 13 & 14

Claggart does not look evil, and he is very careful in the way he dresses. Billy looks heroic, although he is not an intellectual by any means. Billy's handsomeness, which causes others to like him, is the very thing that Claggart cannot stand. His envy runs deep. Billy's morality is as pure as his looks. Claggart knows this and hates it. His envy turns into a venomous energy that cannot be suppressed. Billy is the young and liked soldier who is sure to do well in the navy; Claggart is older and disliked. He thinks that he must compete with the younger sailors.

### Chapter 13

When Claggart saw the spilled soup, he may have thought it was spilled on purpose. This behavior is in line with the report of a corporal, the Grizzled man. The corporal relayed to Claggart that Billy didn't like him and he ridiculed him among the other sailors. Claggart never doubted this. For such behavior, men in power are liable to act disproportionately. In this, Claggart is more extreme than others.

Topic Tracking: Morality 4

### Chapter 14

Some days after this incident, when he is dozing in his hammock, Billy is stirred by someone telling him to move over to the shadows. Billy does this and the man shows him two gold objects. He asks if he is impressed and tells him what he wants him to do for the gold. Billy interrupts him with the knowledge that he is up to no good. Billy is amazed at what is going on. He stutters and wakes up other men. Billy goes over to the veterans and quiets them. He makes up some story and allays their suspicions. The gold objects were guineas.

Topic Tracking: Religion 2



## Part 2, Chapters 15 & 16

Billy is puzzled by the events of the night before. He knows what position the man holds on the ship. He is not sure where the man got the guineas. He cannot stop thinking about the event and the next day he looks for the man. He finds someone who looks right but seems too fat. The man looks over to him and nods with a smile. At a loss, he gives a partial account of the event to the Dansker. He thinks that the man is a cat's paw from Claggart who is still after him. The old man, described as Merlin, watches Billy's reaction to this and gives no advice. The Dansker never gives definitive advice to Billy, he only makes descriptive comments.

### Chapter 16

Billy is ready to blame the strange event on anyone except Claggart, who is always so nice to him. He is very naive in this sense. He thinks that sailors are frank, honest, and straightforward. He cannot imagine one of them being deceptive. This is the way it is asserted sailors should be: simple and obedient. The author digresses on the purity of this era of soldiers. These simple men are described as being honest and pure in a way that is unattainable by someone who is educated. Although they may have faults, these faults are blamed on innocence rather than an evil nature.



## Chapter 17 & 18

*"But after the little matter at the mess Billy Budd no more found himself in strange trouble at times about his hammock or his clothes bag or what not. As to that smile that occasionally sunned him, and the pleasant passing word, these were, if not more frequent, yet if anything more pronounced than before."* Chapter 17, pg. 467

Claggart watches Billy with an odd look. He steps aside when he passes and flares up with anger if he comes upon the handsome sailor in surprise. Billy sees this behavior as merely odd. Other officers glare at him and he doesn't know why. They pass him and give him an evil look. He doesn't connect this to Claggart, but he should. Every time he sees the man who approached him with the guineas, he is smiled at. Billy, remarkably, never questions him. He wonders about it, but he never dares to ask.

Topic Tracking: Morality 5

### Chapter 18

Because of the lack of frigates, the *Bellipotent* is often dispatched on missions it would not be otherwise considered for. This is mostly because of the character of the commander, Captain Vere. On one of these sorties, they encounter a smaller and faster enemy ship which they lose in the chase. After this encounter, Claggart approaches the Captain. Captain Vere asks him what is going on, and Claggart tells him that he watched the men during the pursuit and thinks at least one of them is too dangerous to be on the ship. According to Claggart, this man is stirring up troubles. The Captain is impatient, and he tells Claggart to hurry up and get to the point. Claggart replies that he has been watching one closely and he quietly alludes to mutiny. The Captain gets more impatient with these remarks and he asks for Claggart to name the sailor. When he names Billy Budd, Captain Vere is in total disbelief. Claggart tries to claim that Billy left the merchant ship dishonorably and that he uses his good looks to get people's trust. The Captain's attention has been drawn positively to Billy since he came on board. His behavior and attitude always impressed him. He remarks, "heed what you speak. Just now, and in a case like this, there is a yardarm-end for the false witness." Chapter 18, pg. 474. Claggart shakes his head. The moral quality of the Captain is very stern. He decides to test Claggart. He has a young man fetch Billy and take him to a quiet place where the master-at-arms may accuse him in person.

Topic Tracking: Morality 6

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 4



## Chapter 19 & 20

Billy is surprised to find himself in a room with the two officers. He doesn't understand until Claggart performs his serpent-like accusation. Billy is struck dumb. The Captain impatiently yells for him to defend himself, not knowing of Billy's propensity for stuttering. The Captain speaks more softly and tells Billy to take his time. This only makes Billy frightened and angry. He punches Claggart square in the forehead. Claggart collapses. The Captain's fatherly tone suddenly becomes very soldierly. He makes Billy wait in another room. The surgeon enters and sees the black blood coming out of Claggart's nose. He confirms his death. The Captain excitedly calls this divine judgement. Claggart was "[s]truck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" Chapter 19, pg. 478. The surgeon is upset by this behavior as they move the body. The Captain calls for a drumhead court. He orders that no one but the lieutenants be notified of this event.

### Chapter 20

The Captain is in a frenzy. The surgeon thinks that Billy should be confined and tried by the admiral once they rejoin the fleet. He doesn't want to look like he is threatening the authority of the Captain so he says nothing. All the officers are in the same quandary.



## Chapter 21 & 22

The line between sanity and insanity is described as being hard to draw and this affects the Captain according to the surgeon. The incident came at a bad time. The surgeon knows that both Billy and Claggart were in the wrong. The Captain wants to think everything through carefully. While he does this, he is criticized by his officers. The Captain is aware that this situation could inspire mutiny. The drumhead court is convened. The judges are the first lieutenant, the captain of the marines and the sailing master. This is a variant of the usual court. It is held in the same cabin as the incident. Billy is arraigned. Captain Vere is the sole witness. He tells of Claggart's false accusations and the single punch. When asked if this is true, Billy responds:

*"Captain Vere tells the truth. It is just as Captain Vere says, but it is not as the master-at-arms said. I have eaten the King's bread and I am true to the King."* Chapter 21, pg. 482

The Captain nods in agreement. Billy stammers and breaks down admitting he should have used his tongue instead of his fist. They ask if he is part of a planned mutiny, and then ask him why the master-at-arms would have lied. The Captain tells the interrogator that Billy cannot know that answer. He tells the court to direct attention to the murder, not the reason. They ask if anyone else can shed light on the subject. The Captain says that this is not important. He paces and speaks about the conflict between military service and moral scruple. In this discussion, it is right by God to spare the innocent but wrong by the military not to execute him. The Captain eloquently curses this paradox. He warns his men not to have too-warm hearts, but not to ignore their consciences either. The men struggle in their seats and Captain Vere recounts the events in a sterile manner. The captain of the marines bursts in and says that Billy had no ill-intention. The Captain agrees, but he reminds him that their court is a military court, not a civilian one. In a non-military court, Billy would be cleared, but they must follow the Mutiny Act. The sailing master asks if they can convict without execution. The Captain says no. He stops speaking and the three men become silent. They reflect on an execution that occurred in the American navy. Billy is convicted and sentenced to hang at dawn.

Topic Tracking: Morality 7

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 5

### Chapter 22

The Captain delivers this decision to Billy himself. Nothing else of their discussion is known. A senior lieutenant sees the Captain come out of their meeting. His face bore a look of agony and revelation. No one ever speaks to the Captain about these events.



## Chapter 23 & 24

Only an hour and a half elapsed between the incident and Billy's sentencing. It was long enough, however, to make sailors wonder where the officers went. All the men are called on deck and Captain Vere announces the events without mentioning the word 'mutiny.' The sailors listen as if in church and then they are dismissed. They do not challenge any of the officers and they are silent. Vere speaks carefully, knowing well that such an event could cause a disquiet in the crew that could only lead to mutiny.

Claggart's body is prepared for burial at sea. Procedure is followed to the letter; Claggart is given the burial required for an officer. Captain Vere ceases to speak to Billy in accordance with these rules. Billy is escorted to the brig by guards.

### Chapter 24

Billy is under guard and in chains with sentries throughout the night. Although he is not pale, the agony is evident on his face. The chaplain sees this but cannot speak to him. Later he returns and they speak briefly. Billy speaks directly of his death. The chaplain tries to confer upon him a harsher idea of death: "Out of natural courtesy he received, but did not appropriate. It was like a gift placed in the palm of an outreached hand upon which the fingers do not close." Chapter 24, pg. 495. The minister kisses Billy's cheek and walks away. It is described as odd that a man of God is paid by the minister of war, whom the author refers to as Mars. Thus Christianity is asserted to have developed: it became impure through its new manifestations. Melville is disdainful of this organized religion as he digresses.

Topic Tracking: Religion 3



## Chapter 25 & 26

Light begins to appear luminously in the morning and the bells ring at four in the morning. The men pour out for the morning watches and the officers assemble. Billy Budd's execution is to be performed on the main yard instead of the rear yard. Billy faces away from the assembly with his head in a noose. At the last moment he yells a blessing for Captain Vere and the men echo him. The Captain stands rigidly as the hull rolls into the waves. The men continue to repeat Billy's blessing, but the Captain is not moved. Billy is pulled up and appears outlined by the sun with the mast and the yard-arm making a cross behind him.

*"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 Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn."* Chapter 25, pg. 497

Topic Tracking: Religion 4

### Chapter 26

Days later, an observer of the hanging, Mr. Purser, asks the surgeon what he thinks about Billy's lack of spasm after he was hung. The surgeon doesn't know what to say about it and Mr. Purser suggests that his heart stopped before he was actually hung. The surgeon admits that the hanging was phenomenal, because Billy's body did not spasm or seizure at all as it was raised up. Usually, there is a spasm of nerves breaking and choking. Billy's body was still. Mr. Purser thinks that Billy died of his own will, a sort of euthanasia.



## Chapter 27 & 28

There was silence at the execution, except for the waves and the gulls. The boatswain whistled for the men to go. Billy's hammock had been weighted with shot and his body was thrown into the sea. When his body was dropped, some men thought they heard a human sound come before the splash. The officers became ill at ease. Captain Vere referred to this: "With mankind,...forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood." Chapter 27, pg. 501.

The day goes normally after the drums and religious service, but in an odd sort of half-reality. A silence overtakes the ship. Men go about their work but do not talk to each other. The officers remain distant.

### Chapter 28

The story does not end with Billy Budd's death. The ships in the French fleet are renamed by the revolutionaries to signify that everything from the old regime has been overthrown. Traditional names are changed to more 'intellectual' ones like "The *Atheist*". The *Bellipotent* meets the *Athee* (Atheist) and Captain Vere is wounded in combat. He is taken to a hospital after his first lieutenant wins the battle. He dies on shore, speaking of Billy Budd. No one understands him.

## Chapter 29 & 30

A few weeks after Billy's hanging, the event is recorded in a magazine as Claggart rightly accusing Billy of mutiny. Billy stabbed Claggart and was given the appropriate execution.

### Chapter 30

Eventually, in the navy, everything becomes worshiped and remembered. Billy's tale moves from ship to ship and is remembered by other sailors. He is remembered by them for his good looks, his way with people and unjust death. The Ballad of Billy in the Darbies reflects his new immortality.

Topic Tracking: Religion 5

Topic Tracking: Historical Context 6