Important Note:
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In A Nutshell:

Alright, let's play a word-association game. I say, Herman Melville, and you say... *Moby-Dick!*

Now, let's imagine that we play this game in the year 1891, the year of Melville's death. I say, Herman Melville, and you say...

Wait, you didn't say anything. That's because Melville's books went out of print in the year 1876, largely due to the critical backlash to his 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*. Melville's first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), were both popular and successful books. They were fairly simple adventure stories based upon his experiences as a sailor in the U.S. Navy, and for a few years it would have been very chic to invite Herman Melville to your New York salon to spin a good old sea-yarn.

But as Melville continued to publish, it gradually became clear that he wasn't just setting out to write adventure stories. His work dealt with historical, religious, and philosophical themes in great detail. Melville's reputation rapidly declined, and he was so discouraged that after the year 1866 he more or less stopped writing. When the plates for his books were burned in a fire, no one even bothered to replace them.

Melville worked on *Billy Budd* at the very end of his life, from the years 1888 to 1891. The book was not discovered until 1921, when Melville's granddaughter gave the manuscript to Raymond Weaver, a man who had decided to go against all the dictates of common sense and good business practices and write a biography of an author that was but a footnote in American literature, Herman Melville.

Except that Weaver's biography, *Herman Melville: Man, Mariner and Mystic*, began a Melville revival that only accelerated when he released the unknown novel *Billy Budd* in 1924. *Billy Budd* is a taut little morality tale that takes place on board a ship of the English Royal Navy. It focuses on John Claggart's false accusation of Budd as a mutinous man, and the difficult moral and legal decision that falls on the Captain's shoulders as a result. The story is philosophically rich and remarkably nuanced, and the historical situation only adds to the suspense because it takes place in the year 1797, in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars and in the wake of several massive mutinies in the English fleet.

After Weaver's brave biography, people began to worship Melville. In particular, *Moby-Dick* became recognized as one of the greatest novels, both in America and abroad, ever to have been published. *Billy Budd* is a classic in its own right. It has since been converted to film a number of times, most notably by John Huston, and an opera has been made of the book written in part by E.M. Forster (of *A Room with a View* and *A Passage to India* fame). Next to *Moby-Dick*, though, *Billy Budd* may seem like small fry.

But next time you hear Herman Melville, allow yourself a mental hiccup before you spit out *Moby-Dick*. Remember that you might not ever have heard of *Moby-Dick* (or Herman Melville for that matter) if it weren't for *Billy Budd*. 
Setting:

1797, HMS Bellipotent. At one point in Chapter 11, when detailing the antagonism between John Claggart and Billy Budd, the narrator observes that there is no worse place for two men that dislike each other than on board a ship. If you let the observation balloon out into a generality, then we note how confining, how claustrophobic being on a ship can be. There's no way to get a breath of fresh air, you can't get away from your problems, and the result is that little qualms that pass easily on land can spark veritable powder kegs of conflict.

Now, the H.M.S. Bellipotent is a military ship, which means that it is supposed to run like clockwork. The narrator goes to great lengths to emphasize that things are even more tense than usual because our story takes place in the year 1797, during the Napoleonic Wars. The English fleet is trying to protect its country from invasion by the French and at the same time it's worried about upheavals in its own crew. Just a few years before our story a massive mutiny broke out, the Nore Mutiny, and no English captain can go a day without worrying that the same thing could happen on board his own ship. These historic circumstances worm their way into our characters' minds and take on the force of psychological motivation.

A last key detail is that Claggart waits until the Bellipotent is separated from the rest of the English fleet to accuse Billy Budd. Vere, knowing the threat of mutiny, feels obligated to act quickly, to make decisions alone because he doesn't think that he has time to tell the English Admiral. The Bellipotent, alone at sea and doing its best to navigate its course, is itself a perfect image for Captain Vere. Men seem very small in such circumstances, and when there is nothing but water under their feet, perhaps all they can do is look to the laws they know for some sense of stability.

Point of View:

Third Person, Objective. The narrator of the story is not involved in the action, and we have no idea how he even got wind of Billy Budd's story in the first place. Yet in many ways, he is a realistic third person narrator. In a lot of 19th-century novels, the narrator tries to make himself invisible, but at the same time he's everywhere. He knows exactly what happened in great detail, and can even tell you what different people were thinking at any given time.

The narrator of Billy Budd is different. Regardless of how he learned the story of Billy Budd, he often admits that his knowledge of the situation is limited. The most glaring example is that he refuses to explain why John Claggart hates Billy Budd. He philosophizes and speculates, but he lets the two central characters - Claggart and Billy - remain a mystery to him and us. Another example is when Vere goes in to tell Billy that he will be executed. The narrator says that no one knows what happened, and again admits that he is just venturing some guesses. In these cases, he's admitting his subjectivity, but (and think about this for a moment) only to try to give us a more objective view of things. By admitting what he doesn't know, the idea is that we should have that much more faith in what he does tell us.
Notice, however, that the narrator is totally inconsistent. For example, how does he know what took place between Billy and the afterguardsman when the two were alone on the deck in the middle of the night? Furthermore, even if he admits that he is speculating, he is painting a picture of John Claggart and Billy Budd that becomes a part of the story he is telling. He takes the little kernel of truth – Claggart falsely accused Billy of mutiny and then Billy killed him – and works backwards. We have no way of knowing what else is truth and what is imagination. As he paints it, Claggart is simply evil and Billy is simply good. Is this a reliable way of viewing the two main characters? Unlikely.

Overall, the point is that you should pay very close attention to what this "Third Person Objective" narrator is telling you and not telling you because, when you get down to it, he's not really objective at all.

Genre:

Modern Parable. Billy Budd is a lot of things. It is a tragedy and a drama, a piece of historical fiction, a literary and philosophical work. At the center of the novel, though, is a moral dilemma. It's so clear that it's easy to put into a couple of questions: what happens when human law go exactly contrary to what seems right and good? How can intention be incorporated into a law that deals only with actions, with what happens? The narrator focuses all of his energy upon these questions, and the details of the story that he chooses to give us are supposed to shed some light on what is right in this situation and what is wrong. This can be clearly seen because the characters only emerge insofar as they are linked to the moral quandary at the heart of the story.

Now, when you think of a parable, you might think of something that has a clear lesson. Think back to the Biblical parables and usually there is one message that can be distilled from the stories that Jesus tells his disciples. In those parables, however, there is a clear moral framework: good and evil align with right and wrong, respectively. In the case of Billy Budd, the situation is much more complex. The narrator seems to yearn to portray the situation in terms of good and evil, but the problem is that it exists mainly on the plane of right and wrong. And presumably, because of a shortcoming of military law, the right is aligned with evil, the wrong with good. Everything is criss-crossed and confused, and the result is that we are not going to get one clear message, only a clear question.

As strange a parable as this may seem, the concerns of the book are primarily moral, and the hope is that by hearing and thinking about the story of Billy Budd we will develop a greater moral sense that we can then take into our own lives.
Writing Style:

Before we even get going, consider the description of Billy being hanged, that is to say: drawn up by the neck until he is dead. The narrator says,

The hull, deliberately recovering from the periodic roll to leeward, was just regaining an even keel when the last signal, a preconcerted dumb one, was given. 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, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of dawn.

In the pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end, to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather, so majestic in a great ship ponderously cannoned. (25.6)

Ahem. Ahem. WHAT?!? We don't know what you think, but to us this makes Billy sound like an angelic little kid jumping on a trampoline on a hot summer day, his face taking on "the full rose of dawn." Let us re-state the facts: Billy was falsely accused by John Claggart. He was unable to respond to the accusation because of his stutter. Out of frustration, he struck Claggart, accidentally killing him. Although Captain Vere sympathized with Billy and saw that it was unjust, he considers it his duty to condemn Billy to death. Billy is, again, being hanged.

This passage sounds like it was written by Captain Vere many years later, trying to seek solace in religious imagery. It, quite frankly, romanticizes Billy's execution. We acknowledge that we're stating the case pretty harshly, but we're doing so just to contrast the biases and assumptions that get packed into the narrator's style. Maybe Billy was a remarkable man and could understand Vere's dilemma, and maybe he wasn't even afraid of death. But all the same, can you imagine him describing his own execution this way?

Consider the narrator's word choices. He describes the horizon as "the vapory fleece hanging low in the East." Why does he choose the word "fleece?" Because he is trying to prepare the reader for a comparison between Billy and Jesus Christ, who is seen as a sacrificial lamb in Christian theology. A moment later, the narrator goes on, "as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision." The narrator's tone, his desire to portray Billy in a religious light, manifests itself in his various word choices.

Also consider the back-and-forth nature of the sentences. They swing from one clause to another like a ship getting tossed in a storm, but they can't even say exactly what they mean. The narrator describes Billy's hanging as "Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of dawn." The sentence has a nice lilt to it, a nice rhythm, but all he's saying is that Billy is hanged. It's almost as if he can obscure the violence of what happens by making his sentences flow with a poetic sense and choosing words that have as much symbolic significance as descriptive value.

We've made our bias clear. We think the narrator's moralistic prejudice comes through most clearly in his very style, a style far removed from the language that Billy Budd himself would have known and spoken. But note that this is not a criticism of Melville. We have little doubt that Melville was aware of the over-wrought
moralistic portrayal of events, and what we're doing is criticizing the fictional narrator of the story. We don't think of the narrator as Melville himself, but as Melville's fictional creation. You can check out "Narrator Point of View" for more specifics on the story's narrator.

Lastly, we'll note that the narrator closes the story with a vulgar sea poem. To a large degree, he seems to be poking fun at its sentimental style, at the poor writing. But let us ask: is his style any better?

Tone:

Authoritative, Didactic. In "Narrator Point of View," we noted that the narrator is not half as reliable as he pretends to be. What is clear, though, is that he is presenting the story of Billy Budd as a morality tale; he has a purpose for telling us this story. In this way, the story is an efficient little machine. We don't learn anything about anyone that goes too far afield of the role they are going to play in the central moral dilemma.

At times, the narrator admits that he doesn't know the exact details of the events he is telling us. Yet the flipside is that he wants us to know that he is smart. The story is peppered with philosophical and literary references, and it is clear that, if there is one character with whom the narrator most identifies, that character is Captain Vere, the learned seaman. The overall result of this attitude is that the narrator is saying, "Yeah, I may not have the facts just right, but you should listen to my take on them because I'm a pretty wise old guy and know a lot about morality and philosophy and history, even if I don't know that much about Billy Budd."

It's no accident that this novel has been taught as a case study in law schools. At the center of the story, the narrator places the questions: what happens when the law tells us to do something that, in every possible way, seems wrong? What happens when actions depict the exact opposite of people's intentions? For this reason, the novel might be seen to be didactic: intended to teach us. It's not necessarily that the narrator is telling us something, but he is clearly trying to force a lesson on us by carefully illustrating a moral dilemma and urging us to think about it.

What's Up With The Title?

Let's begin with the obvious answer: Billy Budd is the name of the main character.

Now let's try to go a bit deeper.

Who is Billy Budd? Late in the story, when Captain Vere is indistinctly heard murmuring Budd's name by his attendant, the attendant reports to the senior lieutenant, and the narrator notes that the lieutenant "too well knew, though here he kept the knowledge to himself, who Billy Budd was" (28.5). The way the narrator says it's as if the lieutenant is one of the few who really understood who Billy was and what happened to
him. If we’re keen readers, which we are, then we might ask ourselves: Do we know who Billy Budd really was?

Lieutenant Ratcliffe bemoans his loss and calls him a peacemaker. Captain Vere thinks he’s a fine example of a man, and wants to promote him so that they can work together more closely. The men are inspired by him. Our narrator portrays him as completely natural, almost angelic. John Claggart, for reasons little understood, despises him. The chaplain is awed by his fearlessness in the face of death, his refusal to turn toward dogma or religion. The naval newspaper will later portray him as a treasonous man with murderous intent. A sailor’s crude poem will turn him into a myth of the English sea fleet, a sentimental sea figure.

What do we think of him? As we skim over this list of different interpretations of Billy Budd, we can see that few of them portray him as human. All tend to either glorify him or demonize him; few leave him a man. Our narrator is no exception. He often goes so far as to compare Billy to Adam, to man before the Fall. The more closely we read Billy Budd, the more we realize that we don’t actually know who Billy Budd is, that the man slips between the lines of the prose, and that he remains a mystery.

There are a bunch of ways to read Billy Budd. One is as a morality tale. Another is as a historical document of what life in the English fleet was like after the Nore Mutiny. Recently, the legal vagaries of Billy’s case have made it a novel that gets studied and discussed in law schools. All of these are valid ways to read the book, but our title declares right from the start that it is fundamentally a human story. Our main question, even if it is an unanswerable one, is: Who is Billy Budd?

What’s Up With The Ending?

As we move toward the end of the book, we begin to get a number of different perspectives on the story that we are being told. We see a naval newspaper that portrays Billy as a mutinous man with murderous intent, and then we see a sailor’s poem that turns him into a corny mythical seaman. At first glance, both seem ridiculous because we know the real story. Or do we?

Looking back on what we have read, we realize that we never learn anything about our narrator or how he got his information about the incidents aboard the Bellipotent. For all we know, his story is just one more misinterpretation of what happened to Billy Budd. Maybe all along he has been portraying Billy as being handsomer than he really was, simpler and stronger, braver. What happens as we approach the end of the book is that we begin to re-evaluate everything that we have already read, to see it in a different light. If we're literary dorks, which we are here at Shmoop, then we might even start over and try reading it all again.

Of course, if we question everything in the book, then the entire story seems to slip away from us. We’re left to wonder: What’s the point of telling this in the first place if you’re going to get it all wrong anyway?

The point is that the narrator is making an effort to get it right, striving for an objective view of things even if he knows that he can never actually capture it. If Billy's story is completely forgotten, then there's nothing
to learn from it and it will be just like it never happened. In a way, the ending is another bit of honesty. It makes transparent the process by which events are distorted as they are re-told, the ways in which our memories and miscommunications convert real world happenings into stories and fictions.

In a way it's a bit like the curtain falling on a play that you didn't realize was a play. The curtain signals the ending, but it also signals the fact: This is a play. It may be a recreation of real events, but it isn't real.

The take-away point: the ending (like all good endings) sends you back to the beginning, and forces you to question what you thought you already knew.

Symbols, Imagery, and Allegory:

The H.M.S. Bellipotent

In the "Setting" section, we explain a bit about the climate of 1797. The story takes place during the Napoleonic Wars in the same year as a number of massive mutinies in the English fleet. Thus a man like Captain Vere was concerned not only with fighting a war against the French but also with keeping peace within his own crew.

As much as the narrator tends to zoom out to explain the historical circumstances of the story, he tries to confine himself to the events on board the H.M.S. Bellipotent. As he says, the story is restricted "to the inner life of one particular ship and the career of an individual sailor" (3.1). At another point, the narrator notes how the ship itself makes up the story's entire stage. He says, "In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed gun deck, and one of the external provocations a man-of-war's man's spilled soup" (13.1). The confined space of the Bellipotent is where the story happens, where the events take place.

In making this point, the narrator is concerned with the fact that even the most dramatic of passions can unfold on a minor stage. As he says, "Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage" (13.1). The Bellipotent, as you've probably noted, is anything but a palatial stage. In fact, the nature of the Bellipotent as a stage is extremely important to the story, to how events unfold. In other words, the Bellipotent is not just a passive setting where things take place, the setting actually affects the way that things happen.

How does the ship do this? One way is that it is an extremely confined space. Claggart, for whatever his reasons, has a consuming hatred of Billy Budd. In normal circumstances, he might just go out for a drive in the country to get some fresh air. In this case, though, he has nowhere to go. He is constantly forced to rub up against a man that he can't stand. Whereas in most plays, it is implied that the action is taking place in a location much wider than the stage itself, here the "stage" sets the boundaries of where the characters can actually move. The fact that Claggart cannot physically escape from Billy means that he cannot escape from his own hatred, and the confined space is one reason that Claggart snaps and falsely accuses Billy.
The other thing about ships in general is that they are isolated things, that they're floating out at sea, and the Captain is using his little compass and his knowledge of the movements of the sun and the moon and the stars to stay on course. Things are not solid out at sea. There's a third axis that doesn't exist on land. Things go down into the water to unfathomable depths. In the case of the Bellipotent, the narrator is careful to note that when the events unfold the ship is out on a separate mission and hence is alienated from the rest of the English fleet. The sense of isolation contributes to the enormous responsibility and helpless that Captain Vere feels when he is confronted with the case of Billy Budd.

Claggart, clever devil that he is, knows this and takes advantage of it. He doesn't approach Vere until they are out on their own, and he waits until they've just failed in their pursuit of a French ship. He waits until Claggart is "doubtless somewhat chafed at the failure of the pursuit" (18.3), and then he takes advantage of the setting. He waits to accuse Billy until Claggart is especially vulnerable and alone.

**Billy Budd, Christ Figure**

Whoever this narrator is, he really likes Billy Budd. A lot. One of the ways that you can tell is that he is constantly comparing Billy Budd to religious figures. The comparisons mainly fall into two different categories: those linking Billy to the Biblical Adam before the "Fall of Man," and those comparing Billy to Jesus Christ. We'll deal with the Adam comparisons in "The Noble Savage" section (see below). Here, we're mainly concerned with what it means for the narrator to treat Billy as an 18th-century Christ figure.

Let's focus in on Billy's execution scene. Billy's last words are "God Bless Captain Vere!" (25.2). The words aren't too far off from Christ's own cry of forgiveness in Luke 23:24 – "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In a way, though, Billy's forgiveness is even more remarkable. Forgiveness, of course, implies that there's something to forgive, that there is something that the forgiver could begrudge the one who he is forgiving.

With Billy, though, he doesn't even seem to hold anything against Captain Vere after Vere condemned him to death. It's almost like he doesn't understand that he has reason to be angry with Captain Vere or to resent him. After all, he isn't actually forgiving Vere. It's more like he's affirming Vere's decision to execute him and hoping that God will give Vere strength since Billy knows that he is going to be wracked by guilt.

In this way, Billy appears more remarkable (or maybe less human) than Christ does in the Bible. For Billy there is not a single moment where his faith wavers. The moment in the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) simply does not exist for Billy. People often have trouble relating to Christ because he is so good. The whole point, of course, is that Christ is part divine and part human, meaning that he is capable of human weakness. In a way, though, Billy is even harder to relate to.

What does this mean? Is the narrator trying to replace Christ with Billy? Actually, this probably has a lot more to do with the narrator himself than it does with either Billy or Christ. Consider how the narrator describes the moment when Billy is hanged:
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, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of dawn. (25.5)

As we point out in "Writing Style," the narrator seriously romanticizes Billy's execution. After all, who can say what the light of the "Lamb of God" looks like? Is this something that the narrator actually saw or something that he is reading into what he saw?

In the final chapter of the book, the narrator notes how the sailors kept track of the spar (big pole of the main mast) where Billy died. As he says, "To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross" (30.1). The narrator, who clearly considers himself superior to the sailors, seems to portray their worship of Billy as excessive and sentimental. Yet, if you take a minute and read back over the passages that compare Billy to Christ, you'll quickly realize that the narrator himself does this to an even greater degree.

By making Billy even more Christ-like than Christ, the narrator idealizes him to the point that it's hard to imagine Billy as a real human figure, as someone with whom it is possible to empathize. One of the great ironies of Billy Budd is that, in seeking to exonerate the main character, the narrator actually makes him disappear by removing him from the realm of human beings that it is possible for us to imagine.

**Faith vs. Science**

These days, when you hear "faith versus science" the first thing you probably think is: evolution versus creationism. In Billy Budd, though, the tension between faith and science is not so simple or straightforward as Religion versus Science, or Believers versus Atheists. On some level, you might say that the real tension is not faith versus science so much as faith versus rationality. In the central moral debate of the story, Captain Vere tries to put aside his gut feeling that Billy is innocent; he tries to act rationally, according to the word of the law, in convicting him. If Captain Vere permitted himself to act on faith, then it is possible that Billy never would have been executed.

We'll focus in on one particular scene that more or less captures the flavor of a debate that runs throughout the book. This is the scene in Chapter 26, where the Purser and the Surgeon get into an argument over how to explain the fact that Billy did not twitch after being hanged. The Purser interprets it as "testimony to the force lodged in will power" (26.2). The Surgeon, dryly refuting him, says, "Such movement indicates mechanical spasm in the muscular system. Hence the absence of that is no more attributable to will power, as you call it, than to horsepower – begging your pardon" (26.1). As is typical in the portrayal of such debates, the Purser is portrayed as relatively simple and uneducated in contrast to the worldly and sophisticated philosophizing Surgeon.

Yet what is key is that the Purser admires Billy Budd. He thinks of him as something of a hero. He wants reality to align with his desire to glamorize Billy Budd, to portray him as stronger than the average man. The Surgeon is cut and dried; at least openly, he shares no such desire. Just as he dismisses the idea of Billy's willpower, so he dismisses the entire role of human desire in interpreting and explaining events.
The Noble Savage
As we noted above in "Billy Budd, Christ Figure," the narrator's characterization of Billy is jam-packed with the narrator's own ideas about who Billy is and what he stands for. The phrase "Noble Savage" does not actually appear in Billy Budd. It is linked with the romantic and naturalistic thought of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who imagined that society has contaminated man, and that the ideal men were those who were more intimately connected with nature, those who were, as they said in Rousseau's time, "savage." Rousseau's phrase might capture the worldview of the narrator: Billy Budd is his example of the noble savage.

One of the ways that the narrator characterizes Billy is as a simple man. As in, Billy is really simple. What's weird, though, is that the narrator doesn't mean to be putting Billy Budd down by emphasizing how unintelligent he is. In fact, the narrator worships Billy for his simplicity.

Consider some of the early descriptions of Billy: "He possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge" (2.10). A bit later, the narrator says, "Of self-consciousness he seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to a dog of Saint Bernard's breed" (2.11). As degrading as such descriptions are, the narrator's purpose is actually to compare Billy to Adam before the "Fall of Man" in Genesis. In other words, he compares Billy to uncivilized man.

As the narrator explains it, there seems to be something more dignified and pure about men before they became civilized. It is as if "savages" were closer to human nature because they were not yet forced to take on all of the different roles that society thrusts upon them. As the narrator says when speaking of virtues: "they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man" (2.13). The narrator sees virtue not as originating from "custom or convention," but as somehow preceding it. What one might term the good came before civilization and is thus separate from it.

For the narrator, Billy's mental simplicity is akin to complete sincerity. He thinks that Billy's good-heartedness means that he is lacking a certain mental fold that allows for lies and evil intentions to slip into the human mind. The result is that the narrator treats Billy as a romanticized version of...dun dun dun, the Noble Savage!

Now, we poke fun at this view just because we encourage you to get outside of it. Notice how often we point out that this view is attributable to the narrator. Just because the narrator portrays events in a Rousseau-type light doesn't mean you have to. That said, to get outside of this viewpoint you'll have to use the text itself, to find points where the narrator undermines himself without even knowing it.
Themes:

Morality and Ethics
Billy Budd is nothing if not a book rich in moral and ethical questions. One could frame an entire course on the philosophy of ethics around Captain Vere's dilemma. The main problem is an apparent disconnect between military law and moral sensibility. Billy's execution feels unjust, and one cannot help but ask whether, in this case, right and wrong are aligned with good and evil. At the same time, the narrative is carefully constructed so that it is nearly impossible to judge Captain Vere. You can disagree with him, but you can't help yourself from empathizing with him.

Duty
Since Billy Budd is set in the wake of the Nore Mutiny, a sense of military duty is not just a formality; it is a safeguard against massive uprisings in the British fleet. Duty often allows one to act thoughtlessly and simply follow orders, but in Billy Budd one's sense of duty becomes a true burden to carry. As the characters try to sort out difficult moral questions, it is unclear whether they are serving a higher obligation by doing their duty or simply hiding behind it. The story is nuanced enough that there is room for plenty of debate.

Sin
It is unclear whether or not anyone sins in Billy Budd. Sin is an unambiguous word. It means that an action is fundamentally wrong. In the novel, however, everyone's actions seem to be in part motivated by good and in part motivated by evil, in part in their control and in part not. Yet, as a reader, there is an enormous desire to declare some characters evil and others good. Whether or not any single action can be called a sin, the idea of sin pervades the pages of Billy Budd and the fear of sin is a huge motivating factor for many of the characters.

Truth
Billy Budd, sparse at is, is a story packed full of double meaning and nuance. The narrator constantly claims that he is giving a completely accurate portrayal of events. He also tells us that Billy himself is incapable of falsehood. From the reader's vantage point, however, such claims to honesty only make one more attuned as to where the little lies and falsehoods slip into the text. In the novel, truth operates not only at the level of characters and events, but also at the level of narration, which makes the story extremely complex.

Wisdom and Knowledge
Many of the characters in Billy Budd make decisions that have awful consequences, despite the fact that they are extremely intelligent and well informed. Wisdom is not often explicitly discussed in the novel, but it is constantly there between the lines. The question is how one can attain wisdom, and to what degree it is related to awareness, intelligence, simplicity, and instinct. The reader is presented with the wise old Dansker, a typical figure for a tale of the sea, but even the Dansker's wisdom is cast in a questionable light. In Billy Budd, wisdom is something that is pursued rather than present, elusive rather than attainable.
Philosophical Viewpoints
The narrator of *Billy Budd* makes no secret of the fact that he is well versed in philosophy. He makes allusions to both political and moral philosophies throughout the book, and he himself seems to be dominated by an overwhelming sense of fatalism. But for all the philosophical sophistication of the book, the most interesting relationship to explore is that between philosophy and practical action. Despite Vere's learning, he makes poor decisions, and one is left examining one of the most difficult philosophical questions of all: what good is philosophy?

Forgiveness and ‘Other’
At the heart of *Billy Budd* are two characters that are twinned mysteries. To the narrator, one seems to be fundamentally good, the other to be fundamentally evil. Yet they are strange to him. He cannot understand why they are the way that they are. There are many other levels of foreignness in the book, and it is fascinating to see how the narrator's prejudices affect the way that he depicts events. Yet in *Billy Budd* what is so discomfiting is that even the most familiar seems strange. As much as the narrator focuses his energy on understanding Billy, Billy remains fundamentally "other" – a mystery.

Loyalty
All characters in *Billy Budd*, including the villain Claggart, try to justify their behavior in terms of loyalty to the English King. In 1797, shortly after the Nore Mutiny, loyalty is not just something that is respected or valued; it is something that is desperately needed in the English fleet. Often, it is difficult to distinguish whether or not a character is acting out of natural feelings of loyalty or out of fear. It is in this mutinous climate that the loyalty of Captain Vere and Billy Budd will be put to the test.

Man and the Natural World
The idea of naturalism pervades *Billy Budd*. In the novel, it is closely linked with the narrator's inability to explain the behavior of two of his main characters: John Claggart and Billy Budd. The result of this inability is that there is quite a lot of philosophizing about what it means to be natural, to be connected with nature. Yet, unreliable as the narrator is, things begin to get confusing. With all of his speculation, it is unclear whether or not he is making the characters seem more natural or less, whether or not he really believes in naturalism or is simply hiding behind it because he can't explain his characters' motivations.

Admiration
As the narrator depicts it, Billy Budd is not just a man worthy of respect or even a hero; he is a man to be bowed down and worshipped, a man that you can't help but love. In the narrator's case, these feelings sometimes get sentimentalized and exaggerated, but it is clear that there is a lot of admiring going on in *Billy Budd*. At times, loyalty or a sense of duty merges into admiration, and at times characters try to conceal a lack of admiration by appealing to loyalty and duty.
Characterizations:

**Actions**

During Billy's trial, Captain Vere says, "In natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered" (21.28). Vere's reminder to the drumhead court might be taken as a reminder to the reader as well. There is so much moralizing and speculation in *Billy Budd* that at times it's easy to lose sight of *what happens* in the book. A good exercise for the reader might be to write down the facts that he knows about each of the main characters. In a lot of cases, these facts will boil down to a character's actions.

For example, Billy Budd jumped up on the prow of a ship to wave goodbye to Radcliffe. Billy Budd spilled his soup and laughed about it. Billy Budd did not report the afterguard's request to take part in a mutiny. Billy Budd killed John Claggart.

After listing such facts, one can go back and see just how much of the narrator's philosophizing is actually supported by the character's actions. In many cases, you'll find that the answer is: very little. What the characters do make up the atoms of characterization in *Billy Budd*.

**Direct Characterization**

Two of the main characters in *Billy Budd* are mysteries: Billy Budd and John Claggart. The narrator openly admits to the reader that he does not understand either of them or their motivations. Ironically, though, instead of just describing *what happens*, the narrator proceeds to spend entire chapters trying to expound upon the little bit that he knows of the two men. At the opening, he admits that it is pure speculation. But as the direct characterization goes on and on, it's easy for even a keen reader to forget that these are simply the narrator's thoughts, and that they may or may not have anything to do with Billy Budd and John Claggart.

We'll just take one example, one that actually deals with Captain Vere, rather than either of the two main characters. The narrator is describing Vere's calm manner, and he says,

*But in fact this unobtrusiveness of demeanor may have proceeded from a certain unaffected modesty of manhood sometimes accompanying a resolute nature, a modesty evinced at all times not calling for pronounced action, which shown in any rank of life suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind.* (6.3)

What's the key word in this quote? Answer: *may*. As in, "this unobtrusiveness of demeanor *may* have proceeded." Yet, after that key word there is a description that then bursts into another clause and then another one after that. By the time the reader gets to the end of the sentence, it's easy to forget about the little word *may* and to just take the narrator's description at face value. At the same time, though, the narrator's elitist bias is incredibly apparent. He says that Vere's modesty, when shown "in any rank of life suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind." Why does he have to characterize the virtue as aristocratic? On whose authority is he making such a claim? Just remember that the key question when you read passages like this is: *who* is doing the characterizing, and why are they characterizing Captain Vere (or whoever else) this way?
**Physical Appearances**

Early on in the book, the narrator is praising Billy Budd's looks, and he says, "The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (1.4). The view – that one's inner moral qualities give themselves away in one's outer physical qualities – is one that the narrator carries throughout the book as he describes the other characters. For starters, simply note that Billy Budd is supposed to be overwhelmingly good and pure, and from the very first paragraph he is called the "Handsome Sailor" (1.1). There is not one point in the book where the narrator notes a moral or a physical defect in Billy's character.

Now, let's pick out the most obvious contrast, which is the narrator's description of John Claggart. First, he notes that he has an over-large chin. Later, when Billy spills his soup, the narrator describes how he grimaces: "Aridly it drew down the thin corners of his shapely mouth" (10.1). It's not the most flattering description of a person's face that we've ever read. A few lines later, he notes how Claggart's ugly expression was "usurping the face from the heart" (10.2). That is another way of saying that Claggart's moral ugliness gets revealed in the distortion on his face.

Perhaps nowhere does the narrator push this view farther than when he describes Claggart's eyes after he accuses Billy. He says,

_Meanwhile the accuser's eyes, removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones, underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a muddy purple. Those lights of human intelligence, losing human expression, were gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. (19.4)_

In his description of Claggart, the narrator literally says that he is "losing human expression." He takes away Claggart's humanity and describes him as having "alien eyes" like "certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep."

There is something weird going on in this form of characterization. You'll notice how pervasive it is when you boil down the narrator's explanation of why Claggart hates Billy Budd: Because Billy is better looking than he is. Let us ask: What is the narrator's obsession with physical attractiveness?

Needless to say, we don't agree with the views that the narrator holds about physical appearances because they don't hold true in real life. One way to think of this type of characterization is that it's just direct characterization in disguise. The narrator's physical descriptions are infused with his own ideas about the characters, and he is often reading much more into their physical make-up than could possibly be there. Some critics have read homoerotic themes into such descriptions, but we'll just boil it down to a simpler and more provocative question: Do you think the narrator is a handsome man or an ugly man?
Allusions: