***Billy Budd* - Herman Melville**

Written during the last years of Melville's life, *Billy Budd* in some respects represents a resolving of some of the problems which had beset Melville during his life. Always concerned with the place and welfare of man in a universe naturally hostile, and made even more so by the rising industrial revolution (which led to the economic upheavals of 1873-1879), Melville explores in *Billy Budd* the tragedy of man's inability to cope with the difficulties of his own creation.

*Billy Budd*, like most of Melville's work is at least partly autobiographic. Not only is the volume inscribed to Jack Chase, who had been a fellow foretopman with Melville many years before aboard the United States, but the story opens in Liverpool, the city to which he had traveled on his own first voyage, and it is from his own knowledge of the sea that he achieves realism in a novel otherwise filled with dark forebodings and veiled meanings.

**Discussion Questions: These questions are typically multi-faceted and have layers of answers. Please provide written responses to the questions to aid in your class participation and to be thinking critically about all facets of the piece.**

How does Melville create character in *Billy Budd*?

How does his method of characterization help him to develop his themes? Why does Billy stutter?

What relationship does Melville set up between Billy, Claggart, and Vere? How are they attracted to Billy, and how is he a threat to them?

How does Melville use literary, Biblical, historical, and mythological allusions to reinforce his story? Give specific examples. Does the allusion to Billy as Adam demonstrate Melville’s resignation of the inevitable flaws of man when Billy kills Claggart? What is Melville’s view of Christianity and its relevance to politics?

What advantages are achieved by Melville’s limiting the action of his story to only those events which occur aboard the Indomitable?

How and why does the author interrupt the main narrative of the novel?

How does Melville invite the reader to judge Vere’s behavior and decision to hang Billy? What passages, dialogues, and scenes must we take into account?

How do you interpret Melville’s definition of natural depravity?

Explore the two kinds of justice Melville sets in opposition and discuss the moral and thematic consequences of his death.

Is Billy’s death/Vere’s judgment necessary to maintain equilibrium (using the ship as a microcosm of a nation) or is it a tragic consequence of man’s compulsion to use might over reason to control the public?

Is Melville’s piece ironic or paradoxical?

Identify and support your arguments for at least two themes in the text.

What is the the nature of man, according to the novel?

Is Billy Budd a Christ figure?

Discuss Law vs. Justice

Like *Candide*, how does Initiation play into *Billy Budd?*