

Critical Insights: Billy Budd, Sailor

“This volume of the Critical Insights series takes a close look at Herman Melville’s posthumously published novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Revered as a shining example of American literary distinction, *Billy Budd, Sailor* has had a worldwide impact, making it a prime target of scholarly criticism. The volume gathers **13 essays** which collectively illustrate the **thematic depth** as well as the **creative and editorial processes** behind the short, but resonant piece of fiction.

Brian Yothers opens the discussion with two chapters of good foundational material that paint a portrait of Melville and his works within the context of American letters. These opening chapters also set up the particular discussion of *Billy Budd, Sailor* as they describe the author’s last years working on the story.

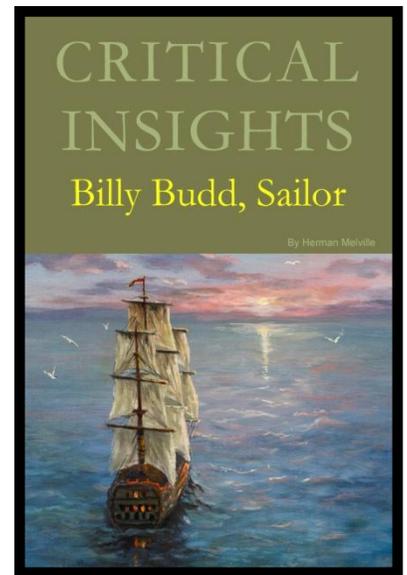
The **Critical Contexts** section of the book offers essays which speak to the process and reception of the novella. In two essays, Yothers describes the importance of Melville’s sources related to both the novella’s content and style, and the evolution of its critical focus. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, in her essay “Performing the Sailor in *Billy Budd, Sailor*,” emphasizes Melville’s grasp of the tangible reality of the sea over its metaphor in heightening the story’s impact.

The larger **Critical Readings** section explores the wide range of thematic elements put forward by *Billy Budd, Sailor*, whether intentionally or interpretively. Jonathan A Cook’s “Legends of the Fall: Genesis, Paradise Lost, Schopenhauer, and Billy Budd” looks at the relationship between Melville’s work and theological influence, both in terms of the story and the readings of it. Nicole De Fee points to Cold War influence on Peter Ustinov’s 1962 film *Billy Budd*, and David Greven discusses the neglect of early critics to properly address the theme of sexuality. Other essays point to the impact of new technologies on the creation and dissemination of *Billy Budd, Sailor* analysis, the relevance of *Billy Budd, Sailor* to the philosophy classroom, and its contribution to the discussion on capital punishment.

The volume is rounded out by the **Resources section**, which provides a timeline of notable events in the life of Melville, an inventory of the volumes that make up the anthology *The Writings of Herman Melville*, and a bibliography. **With its varied and thoughtful discussion, *Critical Insights: Billy Budd, Sailor* is a testament to the quality of the author and his final creation. Recommended.**”

—ARBA Staff Reviewer

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