

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 3: Herman Melville (1819-1891)

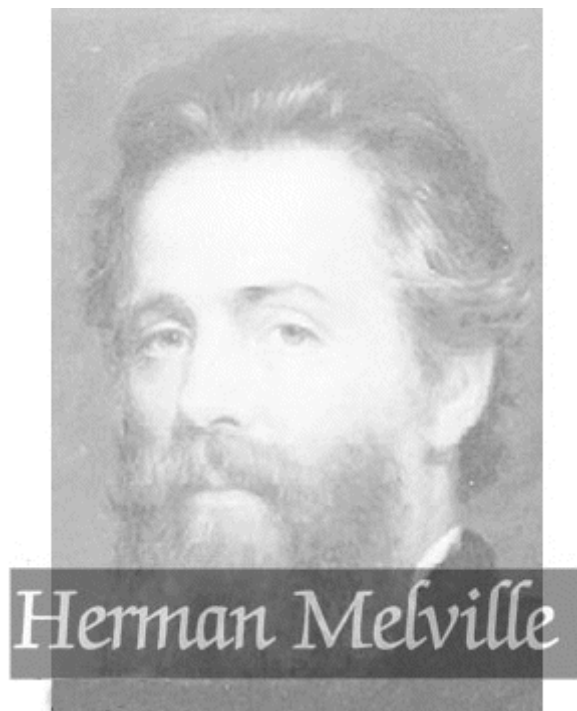
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Source: [The Melville Society](#)

Melville - A Brief Assessment

For twenty years before his death in 1891, Herman Melville was a forgotten man. This is best reflected in a couple obituary notices:

"He won considerable fame as an author by the publication of a book in 1847 (actually 1846) entitled *Typee*. ... This was his best work, although he has since written a number of other stories, which were published more for private than public circulation. ... During the ten years subsequent to the publication of this book

he was employed at the NY Custom House." - *NY Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1891

"Of late years Mr. Melville - probably because he had ceased his literary activity - has fallen into a literary decline, as a result of which his books are little known. Probably, if the truth were known, even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life." - *The Press*, September 29, 1891

Soon after his death, there was a short revival of interest in Melville's work. Many of his works were published again and so were many appreciative scholarly evaluations. A second Melville revival took place about 1919 coinciding with the centennial of Melville's birth. Still unpublished was Melville's last work (*Billy Budd*, 1924) considered by many to be as important as *Moby Dick*. By 1930s Melville scholarship became prominent (Hugh Hetherington completed the first doctoral dissertation on Melville at the Univ. of Michigan in 1933), and, soon after the second world war, a Melville society was organized. Through the next two decades Melville and his writing attracted more research and scholarship than any other American author.

| [Top](#) | Primary Works

Typee, 1846; *Omoo*, 1847; *Mardi*, 1849; *Redburn*, 1849; *White-Jacket*, 1850; *Moby-Dick*, 1851; *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, 1852; "Bartleby, the Scrivener," 1853; "Benito Cereno," 1855; *Israel Porter*, 1855; *The Piazza Tales*, 1856; *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, 1857; *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, 1866; *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, 1876; *John Marr and Other Sailors*, 1888; *Timoleon*, 1891; *Billy Budd, Sailor*, 1924.

The Northwestern-Newberry Series

The writings of Herman Melville. Editors: Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern UP, 1968- . PS2380 .F68

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Redburn, his first voyage; being the sailor-boy confessions and reminiscences of the son-of-a-gentleman, in the merchant service. 1969. PS2380 .F68 v.4

White-jacket; or, The world in a man-of-war. 1970. PS2380 .F68 v.5

Moby-Dick, or, The whale. 1988. PS2380 .F68 v.6

Pierre; or, The ambiguities. 1971. PS2380 .F68 v.7

Israel Potter, his fifty years of exile. 1982. PS2380 .F68 v.8

The piazza tales, and other prose pieces, 1839-1860. 1987. PS2380 .F68 v.9

The confidence-man: his masquerade. 1984. PS2380 .F68 v.10

v. 11: Will be on HM's Published Poems, other than *Clarel*. publication date unknown.

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There are others, of course, but there is much good reading and ruminating to be found in these pages. And don't overlook the "Introductions" and "Notes" to be found in various editions of Melville's works...esp. Weaver's *The Shorter Novels Of Herman Melville*, and the Hendricks House editions of *Clarel*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Moby-Dick*. (and, of course, the Northwestern-Newberry editions)

(Compiled by Robert Kilgore Jr. and sent to the Ishmail Chat group.)

| [Top](#) | *Moby-Dick*: A Brief Discussion

Publication Dates & Sales Information: British edition, entitled *The Whale*, came out on October 18, 1851; Bentley, the publisher, had sold about 280 copies of the printing of 500 four and a half months since publication. The American edition came out on November 14, 1851; the publisher Harpers' sales for the first eleven days were 1,535 copies; another 471 went during the succeeding two and a half months. (MD NN pp. 688-689)

Type of plot: symbolic allegory Time: Early nineteenth century

Topics: 1. It is a reliable treatise on whales and the whaling industry. 2. Excellent commentary on the universe and human destiny. 3. It is rich in symbolism - philosophical speculations about God and Nature. 4. The white whale, among others, could represent evil, Melville's Puritan conscience, religion, or the ultimate mystery of the universe. 5. It is an adventure-romance of the sea, an epic quest, a Faustian bargain, and a metaphysical speculation.

Principal Characters: Ishmael, schoolteacher and part-time sailor; a Presbyterian, like Melville, he projects Calvinistic thinking tempered by his background in literature and philosophy. He discusses such issues as free will, predestination, necessity, and damnation. He is the sole survivor of the *Pequod*. Queequeg, Starbuck's veteran harpooner, a tattooed cannibal from Kokovoko, an uncharted South Seas Island. Disillusioned with Christianity, he worships a black idol Yojo. He becomes a close friend of Ishmael. Captain Ahab is obsessed with the killing of a white whale that has maimed him. He has a scar which extends from his head to his leg. Starbuck, the first mate, is bold enough to criticize Ahab's vengeance, considers mutiny but fails. Stubb, the second mate, is carefree, indifferent, and fatalistic. Flask (King-Post), the third mate, enjoys killing the whales for the fun of it. Fedallah is Ahab's tall, turbaned Parsee servant. He prophesies that Ahab will neither have hearse or coffin when he dies. Moby Dick, a giant albino sperm whale that has become a legend. Pip is the happy, little, black cabin boy who falls from a boat during a whale chase and is abandoned by Stubb hoping another boat will pick him up. When brought back on the *Pequod* he has become demented from fright. Tashtego, an American Indian, is Stubb's harpooner. Daggoo, a giant African, is Flask's harpooner. Father Mapple, a former whaler now the minister at Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford, preaches a Calvinistic sermon, on Job, filled with seafaring terms. Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad are Quakers and principal owners of the *Pequod*. Elijah, a madman who warns Ishmael and Queequeg against shipping with Ahab. Dough-Boy is the pale, bread-faced, and dull-witted steward. Fleece, an old black man, is the ship's cook. At Stubb's insistence, he preaches a sermon to the sharks and is disgusted by Stubb's craving for whale meat. Bulkington is the strong, tanned helmsman. Perth is the ship's blacksmith, who makes for Ahab the harpoon intended to be Moby Dick's death dart, which Ahab baptizes in the devil's name. Captain Gardiner is the skipper of *Rachel* for whose lost son Ahab refuses to search.

The Nine Gams or Encounters

The *Pequod* consults or gams with nine different ships. These gams create increasing tensions of the chase, they add evidence of the ferocity and cunning of Moby Dick, and they provide name symbolism which have a bearing on the narrative. 1. The *Albatross* is named for the sailor's favorite bird of good fortune; it passes by without pausing, giving the impression of impending evil. 2. The crew of the *Town-Ho* tells a story hinting that Moby Dick may be considered an agent for the justice of heaven. 3. The *Jeroboam* provides a second story which may foreshadow Ahab's doom. On board is a violent Shaker fanatic who believes himself to be the archangel Gabriel and who considers Moby Dick as God incarnate, thus hunting him is blasphemy. 4. The German captain of the *Jungfrau* is ignorant of Moby Dick and is also inexperienced in whaling, permitting the *Pequod*'s crew to defeat him in the capture of a bull whale. 5. The *Rose-Bud* or *Bouton de Rose* is a French ship that has captured a sick whale; realizing that the bloated whale contains prized ambergris (a secretion used in perfumes), Stubb succeeds in cheating the unwary French captain of the carcass by offering to tow it away. 6. In the *Samuel Enderby*, a British vessel, Ahab chats with a captain who has lost an arm to a sperm whale but, in contrast with Ahab, is not revengeful. 7. The *Bachelor* is a happy ship and, successful in catching whales, is heading home. Ahab finds the captain and crew "too damned jolly" for his own mood. 8. The *Rachel* approaches looking for help in trying to locate a lost whaleboat containing, among the crew, the captain's son. Also disclosed is information of the sighting of Moby Dick. Ahab gives up this opportunity to show his humanitarian spirit and pushes forward in the relentless pursuit of his nemesis. 9. The *Delight* is ironically misnamed. There is nothing happy about her; she has recently attacked Moby Dick and lost the boat crew. Her "hollow-cheeked" captain dolefully affirms the opinion that "the harpoon is not yet forged" that is capable of destroying the White Whale. In spite of this clear warning, Ahab rushes on.

| [Top](#) | *Billy Budd: A Brief Discussion*

By the time Melville was forty-seven, it was clear to him that he could not earn a living as a writer. He sought and received an appointment through the Treasury Department as a deputy inspector in the customhouse. From 1866 for almost two decades, Melville worked at this job. Beginning 1884, the Melvilles began to receive payments from a legacy that had come to Herman's wife, Elizabeth, and on December 31, 1885, Melville handed in his resignation. He retired to devote himself to his books and his writing; Elizabeth rejoiced that he had a desk full of unfinished work to keep him busy.

One of the first poems he turned to was a ballad about a sailor who had been involved in a mutiny plot, had been apprehended, tried, and sentenced to hang. As Billy, the sailor, lay in irons before the hanging, his mind wandered over the past, recollecting good times and good shipmates. Melville was to call it "Billy in the Darbies," and he wrote a brief prose headnote for it to explain Billy's situation to the reader.

In June, 1888, Melville read an article called "The Mutiny on the Somers," by Lieutenant H. D. Smith, in the *American Magazine*. In 1842, three sailors on the US. brig Somers were suspected of plotting mutiny. The Captain summoned his officers not to convene a court, but to ask their advice. Without trial, without even being arraigned and so, without the opportunity to defend themselves or even ask questions, the three men were judged guilty and hanged. One of the men, Elisha Small, a great favorite with the crew and one whom many felt to be innocent, is reputed to have faced the flag and said, as he was about to be run up, "God bless that flag!"

When Melville was a boy, his favorite hero had been his older cousin, Guert Gansevoort, who was the First Lieutenant aboard the Somers. As one of the officers advising the Captain, cousin Guert was deeply implicated in an act which brought down scorn, outrage, and hatred upon his head. Although the Captain and his officers were cleared by a formal naval board of inquiry, and although Melville's family all felt that Cousin Guert was innocent in the eyes of God and had courageously done what he had to do as much as he loathed the necessity, nevertheless in the eyes of the world and of the sailors of the fleet, Cousin Guert was a fallen man. As the family understood the story within its own councils, Guert's "inside narrative" disclosed a situation of extreme urgency from which dire consequences would have followed if a total example had not been made of the three men. Guert himself, however, would make no public statements about the affair.

In the words of Melville's biographer, Leon Howard, "the inside story and the historical record were at odds in their implications concerning the puzzling actions of Lt. Gansevoort and of the Captain, and Melville's interest was diverted ... to the problem of reconciling conflicting implications. How could a man in a judicial position be held morally free from guilt while condemning to death another human being who was known to be morally innocent of the wrongdoing?"

What had begun as a ballad and had the been expanded into a prose work introducing John Claggart and the conflict between an angelic foretopman and a demonic master-at-arms finally centered on Captain Vere and the nature of his responsibility in a world where the conflict of the "inside narrative" became a frightening metaphor of human existence in the world at large. It is on the character and function of Captain Vere, consequently, that critical attention has necessarily concentrated.

(Source: Milton R. Stern, ed., *Billy Budd*, 1975)

| [Top](#) | Herman Melville (1819-1891): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Norah Sullivan

Herman Melville was born to Allan and Maria Melvill on August 1, 1819 in the city of New York, one of eight children. His father Allan died a "debt-ridden failure of a businessman," as David Kirby author of a biography titled *Herman Melville* describes him, when Herman was twelve (21). Maria Melvill then added the final e to their name and Herman and his three brothers were responsible for providing for the family.

Melville's formal schooling ended at age fifteen, and he worked various jobs such as teacher, clerk, farmer, and storekeeper (Kirby 22). His first professional writings were published in the newspaper of a nearby small town on May 4, 1839 and then again on May 18. *The Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser* printed "Fragments from a Writing Desk." The first of these columns was written taking on the persona of a young connoisseur who is writing to a friend to describe three attractive young women, using wit and rhetoric (22). Both of these letters share a common theme of romantic love.

Herman might have continued these fragments (which might have turned into a regular column) but Gansevoort, Herman's older brother, arranged for him to work aboard the merchant ship the *St. Lawrence* which was headed to Liverpool, England. There he experienced the laboring and cramped conditions of life on the sea and below deck. Fourteen hours a day he (and every other man aboard) was a jack-of-all-trades and did the dirty work of a deckhand (23). These experiences would provide him with material for his novel *Redburn*.

In Liverpool Melville was exposed to the slums of the port city which received thousands of immigrants and where unemployment caused poverty and worse conditions than onboard the *St. Lawrence*.

Once he was back in New York, Melville, a man whose schooling had ended at age fifteen, became a schoolteacher at Greenbush Academy. This illustrated the "unsettled state of America" at that time and the "laxity with which the professions were viewed" (24). Melville's own identity was still vague and his career not yet promising in the efforts of journalism.

When the Academy closed in 1840 Melville decided to return to the sea life and boarded the whaler, the *Acushnet*, which set sail in January for the Pacific via Cape Horn (24). On this voyage he learned about the tyranny of the sea-captains, mastered the techniques of whaling that his masterpiece *Moby Dick* would be composed of, and became familiar with the folklore of the sea. One story in particular was about a white-humped sperm whale named Mocha Dick who had sunk the whaler *Essex* in 1819 by smashing into it because three of his friends had been killed (25). Owen Chase (the first mate of the *Essex*) had published an account of this factual attack, but it would later be made into the famous fictional novel *Moby Dick* by Melville.

Kirby wrote that "a poor catch and a quarrelsome captain&were reasons enough to make Melville jump ship on the island of Nukuheva in the Marquesas" (25-26). He was joined by a shipmate "Toby" and they journeyed with the hope that they would make it to the area where the Happers (who they had heard were hospitable) lived rather than that of the cannibalistic Typees. They ended up in the part of the island that was occupied by the Typees, but it turned out that the two Americans lived among the islanders for about a month and probably were not in any real danger of being eaten, although they were in what might be considered "hospitable detainment" (26). Melville was eventually rescued by the whaling barque *Lucy Ann* because the captain had heard that a white man was living among the Typees unwillingly. His account of this incident in *Typee*, which he would later write, is overdramatic and most likely exaggerated.

Once on the *Lucy Ann*, Melville experienced worse conditions and mutinied again with the rest of the crew when they were in Tahiti. After being imprisoned for his part in the mutiny, he and an acquaintance John B. Troy escaped and to what is now Moorea. He signed up for another whaling voyage on the *Charles and Henry* which was about three months of leisure quite different from his previous journeys. Once they arrived at Hawaii Melville was honorably discharged and worked in a bowling alley and in a store (Bradbury 171).

| [Top](#) | On August 17, 1843 Melville enlisted in the Navy and headed to Boston on the frigate *United States*. Kirby notes that "Even though Melville had seen a fair amount of human unpleasantness on his three previous voyages, nothing had quite prepared him for the institutionalized brutality of life aboard the *United States*." (28) The men onboard were taught to have "prideful yet obedient character necessary to their patriotic calling," and this character was beaten into them if they did not have it (Kirby 28). Melville had some companions onboard who, like him, were unschooled and independently minded scholars. These comrades discussed Shakespeare, Homer, and other literary works (29).

After returning to Boston, Melville began to write again and published *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* in 1846, which sold well because the public was interested in travel literature. Both *Typee* and *Omoo* (the sequel) would tell of his experiences on the Pacific island with the Typee people and of their customs which "deeply disturb[ed] the American bourgeois hero" (Bradbury 172).

After selling these two novels Melville thought of himself well-off enough to start thinking about marriage. After he turned twenty-eight in 1847 he married Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Kirby points out that at this time Melville, "the deserter and mutineer had evidently decided to exchange his adventurous ways for status, financial security, and a family life." (31)

Melville's next book *Mardi* is a narrative which has multifaceted characters with active minds and distinctive personalities (Kirby 31). This "detailed allegory of religion, government and philosophic principles" was not received well by the public (Bradbury 172). *Mardi* was given harsh reviews and described as "tedious and unreadable," although it was more fanciful and engaging with "speculations and digressions that would become the hallmark of his mature style" (Kirby 31-32).

Although *Mardi* was not received well Melville kept his self-confidence and began to view himself as an equal to other

contemporary authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Kirby demonstrates his view in this passage from a biography:

While he quibbled with much of Emerson, for example, he described him to his friend Evert A. Duyckinck in terms that were very much his own, saying he was one of the "whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving and coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began." "I love all men who dive," he wrote. "Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more." (32-33)

| [Top](#) | Since his last novel had not been a success and he and his wife had their first child, Malcolm Melville, in 1849, Melville was forced to write the kind of book that the readers would accept and buy. *Redburn: His First Voyage* and *White-Jacket*, his next two novels, once again were composed of materials from his own life: his first experience on a ship and his days aboard the *United States* with the U.S. Navy. Melville described *Redburn* as a "little nursery tale" written to please an unsophisticated audience (33).

After a trip to England (to arrange for the British edition to *White-Jacket*) and meeting Nathaniel Hawthorne (who became a friend and hero of his), it seems that Melville began to grow in confidence of his writing abilities and began to compose *Moby-Dick* (35). From August 1850 to August 1851 Melville wrote this novel by using his own knowledge of whale lore and unusual accounts by other seamen, impelled by "Shakespearean-Hawthornesque drive" to write a "tragedy in the epic mold" (36). Kirby notes that he "wrote better than he knew, producing at last the perfect blend in a volume that not only marked the apex of his own career but became, along with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of two works that are invariably mentioned whenever the idea of 'the great American Novel' is broached" (36).

Melville followed his greatest book by one that almost ruined his reputation. *Pierre* is a bizarre romance that received bad reviews, but Melville was able to save his reputation by writing short fictions for magazines such as "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno," two of his most widely read works after his death (37). In these years he also had a son, Stanwix in 1851, and a daughter, Elizabeth in 1853.

His next novel *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade* is "a brilliant narrative of passengers on a Mississippi river boat as the image of the inherent moral destructiveness of Protestant ethic, demonstrated with complete skepticism" (Bradbury 172). At the time this narrative was not well received and, as well as in *Pierre*, "the author goes down one discursive alley after another, mapping uncharted territory" (Kirby 38).

In 1855 Melville's daughter Frances was born and in 1856 Melville's father in law paid for a tour for his health in Europe and the Near East (Bradbury 172). When he returned to New York in 1857 he took up the profession of lecturing, but after trying it and being unsuccessful at public speaking, realized it was not for him. He then turned to writing poetry, but was not concerned about success financially (Kirby 41).

| [Top](#) | During the outbreak of the Civil War Melville was allowed to accompany a scouting party on horseback and wrote *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* in 1866 from his experiences. Reviews for this were not very enthusiastic and in need of income Melville turned to government work (Bradbury 172). Although he continued to write after this, he did not do it with hopes of being published.

In 1867 Malcolm Melville was found dead by self-inflicted gunshot, which the Melvilles thought was an accident (Kirby 43). Melville's cousin died in 1871 and in 1872 both his brother Allan and his mother died. Melville was (with reason) even more skeptical and "dour in outlook" as a result of these deaths. He wrote *Clarel*, a two-volume poem about a young American theological student and it results with skepticism, which reviewers were puzzled with (44).

Melville resigned from his customs job in 1885 and remained basically forgotten by the public except for a few of his novels that remained in print. In 1886 his other son Stanwix died of a long illness. He prepared a few of his final writings for publication after this and *Timoleon*, a collection of poems appeared in 1891, was the last book Melville would see printed (44). He also worked on "Billy Budd," which would not be published until 1924.

On September 28, 1891, Melville died "virtually unnoticed" (Bradbury 172). One editorial even presented him as "Henry" Melville, which shows how oblivious the public was to his work (Kirby 45).

Melville's life is characterized by a "search for self on personal, national, and professional levels," and his writing career "represents the long search for [a] new and better vision" (169-70). The way he viewed himself and the way he viewed life after death constantly changed but eventually "looked ahead to a science-influenced era of doubt and subjective interpretation" (171).

The general public thought of Melville as crazy and it took a generation for readers to realize the importance and genius of his work (171). His work, although not always received well by the public he presented it to, was part of the first "great period of American literature," which includes that of Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman and Thoreau (Bradbury

172). Kirby calls him the "consummate literary chameleon," describing his ability to take on different guises and write both enjoyable historical fiction and deep philosophical and imaginative novels (46).

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| [Top](#) | Study Questions

General:

1. In Chapter 54 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, the narrator, relates a tale of mutiny he once narrated—long before "telling" *Moby-Dick* itself—to a group of Spanish friends "smoking upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza of the Golden Inn." The story may appear to be as much a rehearsal for Melville's later stories as it was for *Moby-Dick* itself. Focusing either on "Benito Cereno" or on "Billy Budd, Sailor" in light of "The Town-Ho's Story," examine Melville's later explorations of mutiny or feared mutiny and the characters who develop or refine attributes Melville embodies in Steelkilt and Radney.

"Bartleby"

1. What does the subtitle of "Bartleby" suggest? What is the significance of Wall Street and the walls in the story?
2. What is the significance of the information that the narrator provides about himself and his employees at the beginning of the story? How does it prepare us to understand Bartleby and the narrator's attitude toward him?
3. Why does Melville tell the story from the point of view of the employer rather than of the office staff or of Bartleby himself? What effect does this narrative strategy have on the reader?
4. How reliable is the narrator? Are there any indications that he might be obtuse or unreliable? Give examples.
5. What incident unleashes Bartleby's passive resistance? What escalates it at each point?
6. What assumptions govern the question that the narrator asks Bartleby: "What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?"
7. What ethic does Melville implicitly oppose to the ethic of Wall Street? (This question leads into a discussion of the New Testament echoes running through the story.)
8. Why does the narrator conclude that Bartleby "was the victim of an innate and incurable disorder"? How does it affect our responses to the story if we accept this conclusion?
9. What is the significance of the postscript the narrator appends to the story? What psychological (or ideological) purpose does it serve for the narrator? What symbolic purpose does it serve for Melville?
10. How much has the encounter with Bartleby changed the narrator by the end of the story? Is the narrator "saved"?
11. Choose any one of the following moments of dialogue in Melville and use it as a prism through which to "read" the work in which it appears: (a) "'Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!'" (b) "'Follow your leader.'" (c) "'God bless Captain Vere!'"
12. Part of what fascinates the reader (and possibly Melville himself) about Bartleby is his inscrutability. Describe the various "walls" Bartleby finds himself trapped behind and explore the ways in which the story's structure or design reinforces the reader's inability to penetrate the inscrutability of those walls.

"Paradise and Tartarus":

1. What contrast does the opening of "Paradise" draw between the Bachelors' haven and the outside world? How does

Melville develop the implications of the opening passage in the rest of the sketch?

2. How might the fate of the medieval Knights Templars be relevant to the nineteenth-century Templars?
3. Read out loud the paragraphs about the survival of Templars in modern London and ask: What effect does this imagery have? What attitude does it create toward the Templars?
4. Read out loud the description of the Templars' banquet and ask: What is the significance of this imagery? What associations does it suggest to you? (The teacher might amplify the discussion by pointing out the parody of Plato's Symposium suggested by dubbing the field-marshal/waiter "Socrates.") What bearing does this description have on the second sketch of the pair?
5. What role does the narrator play in each of the two sketches? How would we situate him vis-à-vis the bachelors of the first sketch and the factory owner and workers of the second sketch?
6. What business takes the narrator to the paper mill? What might his "seedsman's business" symbolize?
7. Why does Melville link these two sketches as a pair? What devices does he use to cement the links? What connections does he invite readers to make between the bachelors and the maids, between Temple Bar and the New England paper factory? How is the contrast between the bachelors of the first sketch and maids of the second sketch continued within the second sketch?
8. Read out loud the passage describing the landscape of Devil's Dungeon and ask what its imagery suggests.
9. What is the significance of the imagery Melville uses to describe the factory? (Read aloud passages drawing the students' attention to the girls' dehumanization and the machine's preemption of their reproductive functions.)
10. What is Melville critiquing in this pair of sketches? Why does he link the economic to the sexual, production to reproduction?

| [Top](#) | "Benito Cereno":

1. Through whose eyes do we view the events in the story? Where in the text does Melville shift into Delano's point of view? Whose point of view does the Deposition represent?
2. Why doesn't Melville choose to write the story from Babo's point of view? What might his purpose be in confining us to Delano's and later Benito Cereno's point of view? What limitations does this narrative strategy impose on us as readers?
3. How reliable are Delano's perceptions of reality? What tendencies in particular make him an unreliable interpreter of the behavior he sees manifested on board the *San Dominick*?
4. The best example of how Delano's racism keeps him from recognizing that the blacks have staged a revolt is the episode in which he sees Babo use the flag of Spain as a bib for Don Benito, but misinterprets it as an "odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows." How does that episode originate?
5. What attitude toward slavery does Delano exhibit? How does his attitude differ from Benito Cereno's?
6. Most of the confusion in interpreting "Benito Cereno" arises from the latter part of the story. It is easy to see that Delano's view of blacks as stupid is wrong, but does Melville present Benito Cereno's view of blacks as a corrective to stereotype, or merely as another stereotype? Does the Deposition represent the "truth"?
7. How does the language of the Deposition differ from the language Melville uses elsewhere in the text? What makes us take it for the "truth"?
8. What is Benito Cereno's interpretation of events, as opposed to Delano's initial interpretation? How does he explain the slaves' revolt?
9. Does the Deposition indirectly provide any alternative explanations of why the blacks may have revolted? What does

it tell us about the blacks' actual aims? How do they try to achieve those aims?

10. Does Melville provide any clues to an interpretation of the story that transcends the racist stereotypes of Delano and Cereno?
11. What is the narrative point of view of the few pages following the Deposition? How do you interpret the dialogue between the two captains? Does it indicate that either Delano or Cereno has undergone any change in consciousness or achieved a new understanding of slavery as a result of his ordeal?
12. What seems to be the message of the scene with which the story ends? What do you think Melville was trying to convey through the story? How does the story continue to be relevant or prophetic?
13. Argue that in describing Hawthorne's "power of blackness" in his review of Mosses, Melville was actually characterizing his own work. Focus on "Benito Cereno" in your analysis and consider whether or not Melville focuses on black slaves as human beings.
14. Newton Arvin has written about "Benito Cereno" that "the story is an artistic miscarriage, with moments of undeniable power." Evaluate the fairness of this statement given your own reading of the story.
15. Imagine a retelling of "Benito Cereno" in which Babo becomes the hero. What particular inconsistencies within the story as it stands would the narrator have to resolve?

| [Top](#) | *Billy Budd*:

1. Why does Melville begin the story with a description of the Handsome Sailor? What does this figure seem to represent? What is the significance of the fact that the first example Melville cites of the Handsome Sailor is "a native African of the unadulterate blood of Ham"? What characteristics does Billy share with the Black Handsome Sailor? What is the purpose of the analogies Melville suggests between the "barbarians" of pre-Christian Europe, Africa, and the South Seas? In what respects does Billy fail to conform fully to the Handsome Sailor archetype?
2. What are the historical contexts of the story? What is the purpose of the historical background Melville supplies on the Nore and Spithead mutinies?
3. What is the significance of Billy's being impressed from the *Rights-of-Man* to the *Bellipotent*?
4. What relationship does Melville set up between Billy, Claggart, and Vere? What qualities does each represent? Why are Claggart and Vere attracted to Billy? In what ways is he a threat to them?
5. How do you interpret Melville's definition of "Natural Depravity"? To whom does it most obviously apply in the story? To whom else might it also apply?
6. How does the tragedy occur? How might it have been avoided?
7. 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?
8. What tactics and arguments does Vere use to sway his officers? What are the political consequences (in real life as well as in the story) of accepting Vere's arguments? Do you see any contradictions in Vere's arguments, or do you find them rational and persuasive? Is Melville's description of "Natural Depravity" at all relevant to an evaluation of Vere's conduct at the trial ("Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound")?
9. How do you interpret the many biblical allusions in the story? In what ways do they redefine or amplify the meaning of the story? What relationship(s) do you see between the religious and political interpretations the story invites? How does Melville characterize the role of the chaplain?

10. After the hanging, Vere forestalls possible disturbances by ordering the drums to muster the men to quarters earlier than usual. He then justifies his action by explaining how he views art and the purpose it serves: " `With mankind . . . forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.' " Does Melville endorse this concept of art in *Billy Budd*? How does the form of the story jibe (or

conflict) with Vere's ideal of "measured forms"? How does the glorification of the Handsome Sailor, and the imagery used to describe him, jibe (or conflict) with Vere's view of "the wild denizens of the wood"?

11. What is the effect of the three sequels Melville appends to the story? What further light do they shed on Vere and on the political interests governing his decision? To whom does the story give the last word?

12. Depending on the order of assignments, teachers can invite students to draw connections between:

--the status of slaves, sailors, and factory workers.

--the legal arguments Vere uses in his role as prosecuting attorney at Billy's trial, and the portrayal of lawyers and the law in "Bartleby" and "Paradise and Tartarus."

--Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience and Vere's defense of martial law and the Articles of War.

--Vere's insistence that "the heart, sometimes the feminine in man, be ruled out" and Fuller's critique of the rigid sexual stereotypes that patriarchal ideology imposes on men and women.

13. Explore the two kinds of justice Melville sets in opposition in *Billy Budd, Sailor* and discuss the moral and thematic consequences of Billy's death.

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