



JEAN MUDGE PRODUCTIONS

Films, Videos & Books About Historic America

Study Guide for:

HERMAN MELVILLE: CONSIDER THE SEA

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Poet Richard Wilbur appears at the ocean's edge to lead us into Melville's mind, "immersed in the sea," as he once said. Youthful whaling experiences in the South Seas marked his consciousness forever. From islands in the South Pacific to New York to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the film traces his steps as he leaves shipboard life to fictionalize his adventures, finds fame, then disrepute, and soon after the Civil War, turns to writing poetry. Dramatized excerpts of Moby Dick and Billy Budd, both stories set at sea, contrast with the landlocked Bartleby the Scrivener. Throughout, the film weighs the virtues of the sea versus the land. The question lies at the base of Melville's inner "at seanness." But it's the infinite, indefinite freedom of the sea that wins his final allegiance.

Topics for Discussion

1. Melville came from a once prestigious and pious New York business family. How did this background affect his confidence after his family lost their wealth when his father died?
2. Why did Melville, already a successful schoolteacher, turn to whaling?
3. Melville's rise to fame was swift. After "Moby Dick," that fame was swiftly eclipsed. Why did that happen to a novel that today is a classic around the world? What did Melville do about the end of his success when he was still relatively young?
4. Melville often contrasts the sea and land in his works. As settings and as symbols, what did the two mean to him?

Related Areas of Study

1. Melville's friendship with Hawthorne was profound and determining. What exactly did Hawthorne do and represent for Melville?
2. Adventure tales to far-flung, unknown areas of the world were popular in Melville's day. Some were fiction, such as Poe's "MS Found in a Bottle," and others nonfiction. Why did Melville's South Sea tales take the lead in this market?

Film Fact

The Melville film was shot on a period replica of a whaling ship used for research along the Massachusetts coast. The "sailors" of Billy Budd's story were students on this ship, including the young man who played Billy. Why did the filmmakers show Billy climbing the tallest mast of the ship and descending it as his story was told?