NEW ESSAYS ON *BILLY BUDD*

The American Novel series provides students of American literature with introductory critical guides to great works of American literature. Each volume begins with a substantial introduction by a distinguished authority on the text, giving details of the work’s composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by a group of new essays, each specifically commissioned from a leading scholar in the field, which together constitute a forum of interpretative methods and prominent contemporary ideas on the text. There are also helpful guides to further reading. Specifically designed for undergraduates, the series will be a powerful resource for anyone engaged in the critical analysis of major American novels and other important texts.

*Billy Budd* is Herman Melville’s most read work after *Moby-Dick*, and it is regularly taught in literature courses of all kinds. Melville wrote the novella during the five years before his death, and it was published posthumously in 1924. The essays collected here investigate *Billy Budd* in the context of nineteenth-century political and social dynamics and the literary response they provoked, as well as the relevance of mythology and the histories of the classical world and Judaeo-Christian civilization to Melville’s book. Also examined are Melville’s later writing, including the late poetry; the text’s development; and its ambiguities. The collection will prove an invaluable resource for students of this major American writer.

Donald Yannella, a noted scholar of American Romanticism, is the author of *Ralph Waldo Emerson* and co-author of *Herman Melville’s Malcolm Letter*, among other books; he edited *Extracts*, the Melville Society quarterly, for fifteen years.
The American Novel

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NEW ESSAYS ON *BILLY BUDD*

EDITED BY
DONALD YANNELLA
To the new innocents,
our grandchildren,
Julia, Kate, Peter,
Elizabeth, Margaret,
Lena, Helen, et al. fut.
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Series Editor’s Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretations has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many works of American literature had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel’s acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered works such
as Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of the American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to American novels and other important texts now widely read and studied. Usually devoted to a single work, each volume begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the work’s composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of American literature, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

University of California, Riverside

Emory Elliott
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Figure 2  T. De Thulstrup, *The Anarchist Riot in Chicago – A Dynamite Bomb Exploding Among the Police.* (From *Harper’s Weekly* 30 (15 May 1886): 312–13).

Figure 3  W. A. Rogers, *The Latest Chicago Idea: Tossing the Anarchist in His Own Blanket – The Red Flag.* (From *Harper’s Weekly* 31 (16 April 1887): 280).
Donald Yannella, the volume’s editor, is Professor of English, Emeritus, at Rowan University. His books include studies of Emerson and Melville, and he served the Melville Society as an officer for seventeen years, including fifteen as the editor of Melville Society Extracts, and filled numerous posts for the Modern Language Association’s American Literature Section.

Gail Coffler is Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston. Her work on Melville and the classics reaches back to her University of Wisconsin dissertation and includes Melville’s Classical Allusions: A Comprehensive Index and the forthcoming Melville’s Allusions to Religion, in addition to articles and lectures.

Robert Milder, Professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis, has published widely on Melville and other writers of the American Renaissance. He has edited Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd, Sailor” and Selected Tales and is currently at work on a book, Exiled Royalties, a Melville study.

Larry J. Reynolds, Professor of English and Thomas Franklin Mayo Professor of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, is the author of European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance and co-editor of New Historical Literary Study. He has been president of the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society.
Notes on contributors

John Wenke is Professor of English at Salisbury University in Maryland where he has twice won the university’s Distinguished Faculty Award. His books include *J. D. Salinger: A Study of the Short Fiction* and *Melville’s Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical Fiction*, as well as numerous chapters, essays, and short stories.