Hocus Pocus Study Guide

Hocus Pocus by Kurt Vonnegut

Contents

Plot Summary

Kurt Vonnegut's Hocus Pocus concerns the overthrowing of a prison by the largely black prison inmates and their subsequent attempt to form a free independent republic of former prisoners in the small college town adjacent to the prison which they overtake during their initial outbreak. Eugene Debs Hartke, the Caucasian narrator, is an ex-Vietnam officer who actively participated in the slaughter of men, women and children during his phase as a commander of American soldiers, but only reluctantly, and only when given orders to do so from higher authorities. A hater of war because of his experiences, Eugene retires to small Tarkington College in upstate New York, believing the small liberal college will be the answer to his salvation in middle age. There he reflects on his radical leftist upbringing as a child. He was named after a failed socialist presidential candidate and believed until his entry into the military that liberalism was the best philosophy. His youthful idealism conflicts with Eugene's young adult experiences as an enabler of what amounted to civilian genocide during his command. To soothe his pain, Eugene often drinks to excess, rants with his students after class about the rotten nature of American foreign policy, and has affairs with various women professors across the scenic campus.

A zealot right wing media star suddenly accuses Eugene of misleading the students of Tarkington, one of whom is his daughter, with Eugene's poisonous views about America's darker political and historical side. Further adding to Eugene's termination from the school is the fact he's been having an affair with the college president's wife, a fact that is corroborated with detailed records of their illicit meetings at Eugene's termination hearing. Forced to take whatever job he can to support himself and his mentally unstable wife and mother-in-law, Eugene applies for and is accepted at the prison across the lake from the college. He is hired to teach convicts how to read and write. Eugene does so enthusiastically, but is disturbed by the fact that almost every prisoner is black at the facility, while the owners of the private prison are Japanese businessmen seeking stable investments for growth in America. When the riots occur and Eugene is asked for counsel, he advises the prisoners to surrender, since no outcome save their deaths is possible. They refuse to listen and take the right wing media star and his entourage as hostages. Eventually, the law forces stage a liberation of the hostages, killing all the prisoners in the process. Eugene is freed but awaits a certain guilty outcome at an upcoming trial for unfounded charges he actively inspired the prisoners to revolt by making them think about their conditions in the prison.

Chapter One

Chapter One Summary

Eugene Debs Hartke is born into a very liberal Indiana family in America in 1940. He is named after a famous socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs who, although he failed in his bid, became one of the highest vote earners ever in American political history for the sheer number of votes he received as a third party candidate. Eugene hates his parents because he feels they have betrayed their own ideals and live for material comfort only. His father forces Eugene to attend West Point Military Academy despite Eugene's lack of desire. The result is that Eugene becomes an officer during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and orders the deaths of many thousands of people during the war. His parents die in a freakish accident while he is overseas when a curio shop at Niagara Falls collapses, killing them. Worse, from Eugene's point of view, is his rash decision to marry Margaret without first discovering that a strong streak of insanity runs throughout her family. Eugene quickly winds up supporting both of the women who remain at home with the windows closed and drapes drawn, living lives as virtual hermits albeit together. He relates as narrator that he now awaits trial in Rochester, New York, at an unspecified future date for having participated in the uprising of a nearby prison population and offered material support to the rioters' cause. With grim finality, Eugene resigns himself to not carrying on much longer no matter his trial's outcome, as his tuberculosis has now reached an advanced stage and he's not long for this world.

Chapter One Analysis

Kurt Vonnegut introduces his main protagonist Eugene Hartke in Chapter One and quickly sketches in his overall life's arc, from his childhood home in Ohio, to his tours as a commanding officer in Vietnam, and to tenure as a college professor in a small, upscale New York state university, and finally to his firing and hiring at the nearby prison to teach illiterate inmates. Eugene's life is anything but rosy, filled with personal tragedy and professional betrayal. He winds up arrested for a prison riot he did not cause nor assist, and tells the reader his story will make more sense once one has had a chance to hear it in detail. While the entire narrative arc of the book is delineated in broad terms in Chapter One, it is far from a complete telling of the story's events. In fact, as Eugene continues his narrative in the following chapters, it becomes clear that nothing in his life's story makes much sense as a whole. It is only when one looks critically at the small pieces that have gone into making up his life, Eugene tells the reader, that one begins to see an underlying series of motifs. Vonnegut is very cleverly telling the entire story, in other words, in the first chapter. This forces the reader to pay less attention to the plot and more to the characters and how they either help or prevent the main story from unfolding.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

Scipio, New York, is the town where the college of Tarkington as well as the nearby Athena prison across a shimmering lake exist. Eugene relates the history of the early American valley and how its founders made the covered wagons that many pioneers rode to settle the west. The Mohiga Wagon Company and its creator, Aaron Tarkington, became a huge success. Tarkington, who suffered unjustly from dyslexia, decides to use his money to create an educational center that will especially cater to students such as himself who having learning disabilities and have been discriminated against at more traditional universities. Though modest, the Tarkington University slowly grows into a prestigious if very small school of higher learning. Eugene tells how Elias Tarkington, a descendant's of Aaron's, was nearly shot to death at Gettysburg during the Civil War when a Confederate soldier mistakenly believed Elias was Abraham Lincoln. The Confederate soldier is shot and dies erroneously believing he has assassinated Lincoln. Eugene sadly reflects how he held many such dying young American boys during Vietnam and how they never felt very heroic dying for some cause they couldn't even remember at death's doorstep. He remembers how one dying soldier looked at him and of life surmised, "Dirty joke. Dirty joke."

Chapter Two Analysis

Vonnegut as writer wants the reader to appreciate the history of the fictional Mohiga Valley as one founded on good intentions, no matter the final outcome. To this extent, he carefully details the rich streak of altruism that went into the formation of Tarkington College by its creator. The college is basically a haven for students with learning disabilities who have been discriminated against in more traditional settings, for example, and their special needs are catered to by school charter. Eugene's memory of a dying soldier he helped as he lay dying concludes this chapter. The soldier basically calls life a dirty joke and then dies. Eugene's characterization of the dead soldier's dying words acts as the perfect metaphor for how Eugene as a character will view his own life's events.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

After being wounded in the Civil War because he was mistaken for Abraham Lincoln, Elias Tarkington retired to the valley bearing his namesake college. During one phase of the college's early history, Eugene tells the reader, Elias had 27 perpetual motion machines created by several of his more industrious engineering students. Since there is no such principle of perpetual motion known to physics, the idea strikes Eugene as the height of absurdity. He tells how Elias had the machines made with incredible detail and intricacy, even though they do not and never have practically worked as anything more than expensive desk paperweights. Eugene tells the reader how when he discovered the perpetual motion machines rusting in an attic, he had several students polish them and display them in the college's main library. Eugene informs the reader that the college has remained an independent bastion of higher learning ever since Elias created it, but its student body never exceeds 300 so that the quality of education is maintained.

Chapter Three Analysis

Chapter Three is very expository. Vonnegut concentrates on one particular incident to illustrate the hopelessly naive optimism of the founding Tarkington family. Elias Tarkington actually had a series of perpetual motion machines created by his students. The narrator ridicules the machines, stating what is known to science, that such machinery is the stuff of dreams, not hard science. And yet, Eugene admits he finds the machines and their makers charming in an odd manner. After all, they spent an incredible amount of time and energy actually constructing the non-working devices. In essence, Eugene views them as artistic sculptures rather than machines of science, and so has them displayed in the school's library as a cautionary warning against hubris versus research. This is foreshadowing by Vonnegut as the author, in that later the machines will be used against Eugene by the school board trustees as an example of how Eugene tries to "poison" the students' minds and make them cynical. This is a charge Eugene vehemently denies to the reader.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Eugene reflects back to his teenage years in Ohio. His father worked for Barrytron, a chemical company that was acquired by the conglomerate corporation Du Pont when Eugene was 16 years old. The acquisition fundamentally changed his family's fortunes. His father, a long-time employee of Barrytron, undergoes a mid-life crisis, fearing he will lose his job when Du Pont reviews its employee roster. His father has an affair which becomes an embarrassing bit of town gossip, well-known to all, which further alienates Eugene from his father and strains his parents' already fragile marriage. But worst of all, Eugene remembers how his father insisted on participating in Eugene's science fair experiment against Eugene's better judgement. His father takes over, producing an experiment so clearly engineered by an adult that Eugene is disqualified from the fair on the grounds he received help with his project. Eugene is humiliated by the way his father callously treats both the judges who disqualify them as well as Eugene himself, who feels betrayed by his father's insensitivity. From this point forward in their relationship, father and son will hardly be on speaking terms with one another.

Chapter Four Analysis

Whether rightly or wrongly, Eugene as a character blames much of his life's troubles on his difficult relationship with his father. Eugene's father is a bitter man who is full of doubts about his own future, having lost his job recently when Du Pont bought out his employer. The use of Du Pont is telling by Vonnegut, because it represents a giant, monolithic American corporation destroying the tiny company for which Eugene's father works prior to its purchase by Du Pont. This theme of powerful business interests that shape the destiny of anonymous workers beneath them is one of the main critiques of the novel. Likewise, Vonnegut will constantly indicate throughout Hocus Pocus that if his father had not forced him into the military on a whim, Eugene's life would have turned out differently, and he believes without much doubt, for the better. In a symbolic way, Vonnegut is suggesting that the power imbalance between a father and a son and likewise a country's leaders and its citizens is similar, in that neither the son nor the citizen can do much about a corrupt father or leader who orders them to take actions whether or not they agree with them.

Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

Eugene recalls some of the more eccentric students he's taught at the college. One is the son of an oil sultan from the Middle East who is reportedly worth 30 million dollars. The oil shiek's son is also intellectually gifted. But Eugene remembers that when he first said hello to the new student, the young man asked Eugene to never speak to him again under any circumstances, a promise which Eugene maintained despite his feelings the sheik's son was emotionally a cripple. Eugene feels empathy for the lonely boy, remembering how lonely he had been as a teen back at the science fair his father ruined. As he was leaving said event, Eugene tells the reader how he had run into Sam Wakefield, an enlisted officer, who convinces Eugene he should join the military. Eugene is so confused by the sudden offer that he seriously considers it, desperately wanting to get away from his father at any cost, even enlistment.

Chapter Five Analysis

The author uses shared and similar life events between two different characters frequently in his book to convey a larger image. His purpose is to demonstrate that even though such nebulous concepts as war and peace don't really seem to matter in peoples' lives as an abstract, the ramifications of even the smallest acts of individual choice can often alter a lone person's life forever. Amidst mass death and political uncertainty, Vonnegut suggests, there is still the hope for personal choice to save or help the individual making it. But as Vonnegut points out through his narrator Eugene, failing to make those same choices can equally result in a negative or disastrous outcome, as powerful people with singular financial interests will warp those who are weak in the face of morality and bend them to their own nefarious purposes.

Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary

Eugene believes that had he slipped past Wakefield that fateful day, his entire life would have turned out for the better. But he stayed and listened to Wakefield's pitch to join the military, instead. This had lead directly to Eugene's being a commanding officer during Vietnam. Eugene explains that this meant he watched a lot of horrors inflicted upon men, women and children who were not combatants in the conflict, but murdered alongside it as innocent non-participants. While it sounds cold-blooded, Eugene details how many soldiers killed civilians without second thought when their frustrations boiled over, himself included. Eugene admits he is very bitter that his country forced him to lie about such murders while he was under the oath of service. He tells the reader he feels this makes him complicit, even though he never wanted to be in such matters. He recalls a man who was killed by a sniper in Vietnam. The man's name was Jack Patton. Jack's response to every situation was a cynical, "I had to laugh like hell." Eugene says Jack would've "laughed like hell" if he had seen Eugene on the roof of the American embassy back when the Americans had to hurriedly evacuate during the fall of Saigon, thus concluding the war in abject failure. He says that he is not writing this book for young people under the age of 18 to be inspired for success. Rather, Eugene writes, he believes they should prepare for failure, because that is the true, deeper nature of life.

Chapter Six Analysis

In many ways, the motif of personal failure and a subsequent lack of redemption is central to understanding Hocus Pocus. The author is intent on demonstrating beyond any doubt that although there are many kind and loving moments in life, the majority of time will be spent by all living beings in pain and suffering. His memory of Jack Patton, the cynical friend who always remarked he had to "laugh like hell" at each new insult and degradation life throws at him, is designed to show that even though Jack adopted a tough attitude towards life to lessen the blows, he still wound up being shot to death in war. Vonnegut does not allow anything to stand in the way of an individual's unique fate, in essence. Even if one is nice, or kind, or decent, or thoughtful, one will still be punished and defeated by life in the long run. Though it's a very dark view of human nature, Vonnegut is careful to balance it with a sense of the absurd. The very black comedy on hand, in which even the narrator depressingly tells the reader life is hopeless, actually helps the reader to laugh at the sheer downward spiral of the events. Too much misery, Vonnegut wryly indicates, can actually result in laughter, provided the pain being examined is not one's own, but another's.

Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary

Now a prisoner awaiting trial, Eugene vociferously reads old issues of the Tarkington College school newspaper to relieve his boredom. He finds an account of a bomber pilot from the college who flew his plane loaded with bombs into the side of a Japanese carrier, thus inflicting severe damage to the enemy. Eugene laments that he served during Vietnam, where such acts were few and far between. He wishes he had died a glorious death in battle like the Tarkington College student he has discovered in the paper's old accounts. Instead, Eugene's service had been marred with personal shame and defeat. Feeling that he is being too dark for the reader, Eugene lightens the mood and tells how he loves to play the chapel bells located on campus. Before they were set to an electronic program, Eugene explains he would passionately play the bells so much that folks would marvel at his evident joy. But that was, he suddenly recalls, a long time ago.

Chapter Seven Analysis

The bells represent Eugene's lighter nature, a nature which he very carefully delineates as having been slowly eroded from well-meaning to simply indifferent over the many long years of disappointments. Still, as Vonnegut shows, Eugene once had enough passion to indulge in an activity as frivolous as playing musical bells. In the whole book, Eugene's fondness for this memory of when he played the bells is atypical, and stands out to the reader because it is one of the few times Eugene seems genuinely happy.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary

Eugene relates the history of how the bells came to be in the valley's tiny college. They are made from scrap metal collected from the Battle of Gettysburg, it turns out. The melted iron from former weapons of death had been poured into the bell molds, thus creating something symbolically beautiful in its place. Eugene loves this story, feeling that it represents the best in humanity's yearning to set right wrongs committed by others even when previous to their own existence. Saddened by the decline of the world, Eugene fantasizes about his grandfather, the socialist, and how his ancestor would view the prison across the lake from the college. Eugene speculates the old man would be horrified to see that people had gone from being the primary consideration in the economy and degenerated into little more than largely unnecessary cogs in the wheel. As a result, Eugene states his belief that people are little more than machines to be discarded in the modern age, whether they like it or not.

Chapter Eight Analysis

Vonnegut is very concerned as a writer with how America has allowed itself to decline and why. As a fictional character, Eugene represents all that has gone wrong with a very fundamental American value of fair play. He is even named after a famous socialist, a political leader who believed in equality for all or that equality didn't exist otherwise. But Eugene is a far cry from his namesake. Eugene has served in war, ordering the killing of and carrying out the killing of numerous civilians. Even though he is our nominal hero, Eugene is far, far from perfect or even good. He has some good qualities, and he has, by his own admission, some truly evil ones. He is not an evil man, as Vonnegut is careful to show the reader. Rather, like most of the readers themselves, Eugene is a conflicted person full of often contradictory impulses and moods, and he is as much a victim of his own unknowable reality as he is the benefactor of it. He is confused, in short, and while he knows it, he doesn't know how to be a better person, despite himself. He is, for want of a better term, the literal "every man" character, a representation of each person as they face their own life's challenges and rewards.

Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine Summary

Eugene explains that in the prison, the private owners of the facility do not allow live t.v. Instead, they run old VHS videotapes from the 1980s talk shows for the prisoners to watch and nothing else. This way, he tells the reader, the prisoners never have any current event to riot about, so they remain largely docile. He remembers how he once worked with a black inmate at the prison named Alton Darwin. Darwin fancied himself an intellectual, even though Eugene was teaching the illiterate prisoner how to read and write while Darwin maintained such a delusion of grandeur. Darwin tells Eugene that he is a great leader of men, even though he's in prison for selling drugs. But when the prisoners finally do riot, Eugene explains that Darwin actually began to shout, "Follow me!" Alas for a few rioting prisoners who did, they were killed while trying to assault the nearby college town by enraged police. Darwin escapes back to Athena prison and establishes himself as de facto ruler of a new kingdom of freed prisoners. He tells Eugene they will live free and if the authorities try to capture them, they will kill the hostages they've taken. Eugene realizes Darwin and his minor followers are doomed, but cannot tell them so. An hour later, Darwin is ice skating outside when he's shot to death by the police. When he asks what Darwin's final words had been, Eugene is told Darwin died muttering an ugly racial epithet against his own race.

Chapter Nine Analysis

Vonnegut is not shy about using race as another hypocrisy of the American political and cultural system. He points this out by having a black character refer to himself in a derogatory racial term. While it is clear the black man is speaking sardonically and doesn't mean to actually belittle himself, it is equally clear that the man has suffered so much at the hands of white racists in his society that he views himself askance not because he is unworthy, but because all his life he has been told by others, some even of his own race, that he cannot succeed in America because he is black. Still, it is a very ugly and unforgettable moment in Hocus Pocus when this character is so blatantly self-critical, in that it convincingly demonstrates how even the objects of racial ridicule often begin to unwittingly believe the hurtful things that are said about them.

Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten Summary

Eugene tells the reader that once there was a time when he didn't even notice Athena prison across the lake from the college where he taught. In fact, he says 15 years went by before the prison even entered into his mind. And that was only because three prisoners had escaped and he had noticed them attempting to rather poorly pass themselves as locals. They were quickly captured, but Eugene at least knew from that point forward the prison was an actual concern housing actual humans, not just a deliberately unseen entity he forced himself to block out. He relates how his son, Eugene Jr., was the spitting image of himself when they used to walk the streets of the tiny town. That is, until Eugene Jr. grew up and refused to ever speak to Eugene again. Mildred, his wife, and Margaret, his mother-in-law, are clinically insane, he further laments. Eugene remembers how they were with him fishing at a local creek when the three prisoners stumbled across them. Many years later, when Darwin leads the riot against the Athena prison by exploding a door off its hinges, Margaret awakens from her sleep and begins excitedly talking about the fish she caught many years previously the day they encountered the first set of escaping prisoners. Eugene marvels at the intricate nature of insanity and how it works so mysteriously.

Chapter Ten Analysis

Continuing his examination of racism in America, Vonnegut has his protagonist Eugene admit that he didn't even know there was a prison across the lake from the small college where he taught. So absent are any black people from Scipio, the college town, that when a few black inmates break out one day and attempt to escape, they are instantly recognized as prisoners by the white locals even though they're not dressed in prison fatigues. Eugene again believes this indicates how racist the Scipio residents are at heart, in that they have no qualms about Athena prison being nearly all black inmates even though, only a few hundred yards across the lake, the college town is nearly all white in population. Vonnegut is clear herein: the whites are given opportunity for improvement and self-help, even if they are educationally challenged in some regards. The blacks, meanwhile, are sent to a prison where they are left to rot and have to watch old t.v. shows on videotape from decades earlier to keep the mind-numbing horrors of prison life at bay.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven Summary

Eugene relates how he first met the famous t.v. firebrand Jason Wilder when Wilder attended a board meeting in which Eugene was unceremoniously fired. Kimberly, Jason Wilder's learning disabled daughter, tricks Eugene into making a series of incriminating statements over the course of a semester in which she has him as teacher. Kimberly wears an audio recording device so that she can later prove Eugene spoke badly about America and his government, thus bringing into question his loyalty as a citizen. Eugene explains that Kimberly only recorded the parts of his impromptu lectures about the evils of America out of context, omitting whenever he mentioned that America was still a great country, flaws and all. Eugene points out that the college is full of children of important people, whereas the prison across the lake is full of children of unimportant people.

Chapter Eleven Analysis

Vonnegut is clearly not fond of talk radio and its conservative agenda in America. His Jason Wilder character is a very thinly veiled swipe at such conservative talk show demagogues as Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly, archetypes of political division-making who seem to exist not to have discussions as free citizens, but to coerce free citizens into taking imaginary sides in fabricated cultural battles. His use of Jason Wilder as a surrogate for all the loud-mouthed talking heads on radio and t.v. who constantly bemoan America's drift into "socialism" and the like is indicative of how Vonnegut believes as an author the country has lost its footing. The folks who divide the population never do so because they believe in a cause, Vonnegut demonstrates, but do so in order to then rob the divided masses blind.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Twelve Summary

Sam Wakefield, the very same Sam Wakefield who once recruited Eugene into joining the military, later recruits Eugene to teach at Tarkington College, where Wakefield is acting dean. Wakefield and his wife wind up becoming estranged, and Eugene confidentially tells the reader she and he will become lovers as a result. Eugene explains that he has not slept with so many women as to be an expert, but enough so that he feels confident of his abilities. He explains how he constantly plays a student computer game in the commons area called G.R.I.O.T. Basically a future predictor based on mathematical concepts, G.R.I.O.T. analyses the personal data Eugene feeds it and predicts that Eugene will wind up homeless, drunken and without hope. He speculates how his life and the life of Marilyn Shaw, a woman professor at Tarkington and ex-Vietnam veteran whom he has loved from afar but never in an actual relationship, would have been vastly different if it were not for the fact Sam Wakefield existed and entered their lives. With a sad realization, Eugene concludes that one can never know for sure, both he and Marilyn probably would have been much better off without their shared Vietnam War experiences.

Chapter Twelve Analysis

The use of irony is a big part of Vonnegut's style as a writer. The irony herein is that our hero's life is altered not once, but twice, by a chance encounter with the same older man from his home town. This is quite unusual, and suggests that Fate as a force of nature may have a much heavier hand in the affairs of humans than we like to believe as free individuals. Eugene questions how his life might have gone differently if he'd only missed running into Sam Wakefield both times, which is Vonnegut's way of using irony to raise a larger question. To wit, if we can never know as humans who or what will effect our life's outcome from moment-to-moment, then how are we supposed to ever honestly make sense of the world around us? How are we to make long-range plans that can be predicted, in essence, if life is so chaotic and unpredictable? Vonnegut raises this question throughout Hocus Pocus. Interestingly however, he provides no easy answers.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Thirteen Summary

Jason Wilder is a sadistic man, driven by a need for power beyond normalcy. He has staged the firing of Eugene as much for his personal sense of vindictive power as to insinuate himself into the college's board of directors even more firmly, in hopes of selling off the lands and enriching himself in the process. Eugene is ill-prepared to face off against Wilder as is required when Eugene is dragged, unexpectedly, into a board meeting whereupon he finds himself the subject of a termination hearing. Eugene is terrified, but plays calmly unafraid, not wanting to show fear. He eloquently states that while he may not always agree with Wilder's political viewpoints as aired vociferously by Wilder non-stop across all forms of media, Eugene respects Wilder's right to say whatever he pleases in a free society. Wilder sidesteps the compliment and offers Eugene one of his own in return. Wilder publicly states his personal awe at Eugene's record of pro-American support during the Vietnam War as a soldier and officer. But Wilder then launches into an accusation against Eugene of his basic inherent unworthiness to be a teacher at Tarkington College. Eugene is confident he can beat whatever verbal sparring matches he must in the hearing with Wilder until Wilder plays the first tape his daughter Kimberly has surreptitiously recorded. Eugene concedes to the reader as soon as the first tape was played, he was as good as terminated from the college.

Chapter Thirteen Analysis

The manner in which Vonnegut stages the dismissal of Eugene from his job at Tarkington College is less like a board meeting and more like an inquisition. Wilder represents the ultimate corrupter of public opinion, so much so that he has now extended his domain into a very small, private college, no less. Eugene becomes the Every Man Intellectual pitted against a Corporate Shill Machine, a person who simply promotes a positive view of all corporate-backed agendas no matter the proof some such enterprises produce and exploit human misery. Wilder is not there to really see that Eugene is fired. Rather, Wilder wants to also intimidate the board of trustees into never again hiring such "radical thinkers" as Eugene. The irony Vonnegut earlier used is again here in full view. It never occurs to any of the board members, for example, that Wilder's destructive anti-intellectual bent is precisely the kind of ignorance and socially engineered idiocy that the Tarkington College founders were attempting to prevent! Only Eugene understands what has been lost. Alas, his realization only comes after Wilder has staged a virtual execution of Eugene's entire career and public character, leaving Eugene without hope.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fourteen Summary

Eugene tells how before he lost his teaching job some Japanese businessmen purchased Athena prison across the lake. They began to install technological changes that enabled them as absentee owners to make a profit from the housing of inmates. This when the Americans themselves were losing money at it as previous owners of the prison. The changes the Japanese bring about turn parts of the largely African American prisoner population into a better prison for the inmates. For example, the playing of old t.v. talk shows on the prison's t.v. sets rather than live television of current events has rendered the prison population docile. Drugs are at an all-time low in terms of availability. To insure no fraternity between the guards and the prisoners, the new Japanese owners have imported young Japanese males barely of legal age to act as guards. Far from home and lacking English-speaking skills, the young recruits make excellent guards, refusing to sympathize with their prisoners, whom they view as sub-human in stature. Eugene violently coughs. He tells the reader he has contracted tuberculosis while housed in Athena prison post-riot and awaiting his trial for treason and subversion. He remembers how one night before he lost his job at Tarkington how he wandered around the campus, lonely, until he found himself outside the artist loft used by Pamela Ford. Pamela is a single and attractive teacher of art. He knocks on her loft's door. She talks to him through the closed door until he charms her into opening it for him. They stare at one another. "What took you so long?" she asks him.

Chapter Fourteen Analysis

The theme of the foreign takeover of America without much internal resistance or even concern by its indifferent citizenry is prevalent throughout Hocus Pocus. In essence, Vonnegut suggests the ruling class of America has since the 1980s allowed huge debts to be charged to the government as a way of bankrupting the democratic process and then selling off the bankrupted assets such as lands, industries and buildings to foreign capitalists like the Japanese. This so-called theory has, since the publication of Hocus Pocus, become more of an accepted theory to many political followers rather than controversial notion, as recent campaigns in the USA such as "Occupy Wall Street" demonstrate. Perhaps the ultimate irony of Vonnegut's book is that, unbeknownst to the author who died before such social unrest began occurring worldwide, his sense of despair at the decline of the American middle class was a widely-shared concern. In this sense, it is very possible his work and the work of others like him helped foster a sense of community and a desire to confront difficult societal conflicts.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Fifteen Summary

Eugene details that he and Pamela became lovers that very night. She asks him after they finish if he ever killed anyone in the war during Vietnam. Used to having this question asked of him, Eugene answers by giving a cryptic, impossible-to-solve riddle to Pamela. He says that if she can figure out the answer, she will have also arrived at the precise number of people he killed while in action. Wilder plays a portion of one of Eugene's conversations with his daughter Kimberly to the firing committee. Eugene comes across badly, seemingly at war with himself and with a loathing for his country. Wilder advises the committee to consider that the students do not need a "defeatist" like Eugene teaching their children that failure is the inevitable outcome of all endeavors, after all. Wilder indicates the manner in which Eugene has had the old perpetual motion machines displayed in the main library. Beneath them, he displays a card that reads "The Complicated Futility of Ignorance." Wilder is particularly outraged by the latter propaganda. Worse yet, Eugene has been recorded as saying that Nazis were Christians, and that their swastikas were clever distortions of the Christian cross. While this is historically true, it goes against the simplistic pro-American history that Tarkington College expects Eugene to teach to his students. Feeling like he's being sacrificed on the altar of Wilder's ego, Eugene begs for Tex Johnson, the college's president, to defend him. But Tex rushes from the meeting, embarrassed. It turns out there is more incriminating evidence, including photos of Eugene and Tex's wife having an affair.

Chapter Fifteen Analysis

The painful termination meeting of Eugene in which he is publicly confronted with all his worst vices is humiliating. Wilder has hired private investigators to photographically create evidence of the many affairs the restless Eugene has had with women faculty members at the college. Dates and times are all recorded and provided in affidavit format, as well. Eugene's despair is worsened by having to listen to badly-edited playbacks of his illegally-recorded conversations, which use judicious but distorting cuts to create impressions Eugene did not literally speak. In essence, everything has already been decided, and Eugene has been brought in merely for Wilder's public entertainment and bored amusement. The cruelty of the way in which Eugene is let go is not spared to the reader. Vonnegut, who clearly sides with Eugene in a world where gentle intellectuals are persecuted by the wealthy and the powerful for sport and bemusement, places the reader into a crucial test of allegiance in this sequence. Many would morally judge Eugene for his extramarital affairs, but does the fact his wife has been clinically insane for decades and unable to be physically intimate with Eugene mitigate circumstances? Eugene posits this question in the reader's mind by refusing to hide behind the same hypocritical lies that egomaniacs like Jason Wilder present whenever challenged in public. In essence, Eugene decides it is better to be an authentic, if highly

flawed, version of himself than a pretend angel like Wilder, who is anything but when stripped of his self-righteous and self-instilled holiness.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Sixteen Summary

Eugene remembers how before he was killed in action, his buddy Jack Patton sent him a sex magazine which had a short story in it that had quite an impact on Eugene's worldview over time. The short story was called "The Protocols of the Elders of Tralfamadore." Eugene tells us he will explain more about it later. Sydney Stone, a rich ex-Tarkington alumni who has a son attending the college, stands at the meeting wherein Eugene is to be terminated and testifies against Eugene personally. Stone explains that Eugene once accused his beloved son of stealing a mug from the student gift shop and refusing to pay for it when Eugene confronted him in the parking lot. As a result, Stone demands the firing of Eugene on the grounds Eugene has clearly been unbalanced for the duration of his tenure at the college.

Chapter Sixteen Analysis

Vonnegut, who was a soldier in World War II and was captured by the German forces, makes no pretense of his dislike of anti-Semitic behavior and language. Hatred of Jews was a major contributing factor in the success of Hitler's rise to power, and Vonnegut clearly wishes to warn the reader that such figures from history are not so distant as one may wish. Vonnegut cleverly titles the fictional short science fiction story "The Protocols of the Elders of Tralfamadore" as a satirical reference to the infamous anti-Jewish propaganda book The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, suggesting the aliens who are invading from Tralfamadore find great amusement at the idea of humans killing one another over political, religious and economic differences. In essence, the aliens can't tell any difference between homo sapiens whatsoever as outsiders, and therefore laugh at the concept when humans act out on it. Again, Vonnegut's bitter irony borders on scathing, but nevertheless achieves the literal definition of the concept, forcing the reader to ponder at the dual nature of Eugene's words and their deeper implications.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Seventeen Summary

Eugene recalls a debate between Jason Wilder and a trustee at the college he once knew named Ed Bergeron. Bergeron challenged Wilder's baseless accusations that global warming and the like were inventions of green-loving scientists and not scientific fact, and Wilder defended his lies and distortions by attacking Bergeron personally. Bergeron later resigned before Eugene is fired, having to face two personal tragedies. One is that a company Bergeron bought after working at the college turned out to be selling toxic floor tiles, which means innocent customers have been dying from them for decades. The other tragedy Bergeron faced was the death of his gay son, who was murdered in a motel room in Iowa while the murderer was never apprehended. A favorite expression Bergeron typically uttered that would be fitting for the Earth's epitaph was, "We Could Have Saved It, But We Were Too Doggone Cheap."

Chapter Seventeen Analysis

Eugene and therefore Vonnegut constantly reminds the reader that intellectuals of all stripes are endangered in a world where blowhards can speak more loudly and with more anger into a media-driven dialogue, therefore obliterating the need and possibility for people of reason to rationally discuss any subject matter. He cites the example of one of Eugene's friends, a professor who tried to do the right thing and defend maintaining an open air of freely-exchanged ideas, rather than a culture of political and character assassination, the latter as practiced by the Jason Wilder types of the world. Wilder and Bergeron, the defender of democracy, clashed in printed columns in the newspapers, but Eugene feels Bergeron did an admirable job of defending intellectualism as a valid enterprise against close-minded bigots with hidden business agendas. Sadly, Bergeron retires from teaching, sickened by the impact of the Wilders on colleges such as Tarkington, but his business ventures produce nothing but failure because of the greed of those who produce toxic products and sell Bergeron a proverbial bill of goods. Vonnegut restates this with his summation of Bergeron's epitaph, vividly showing how mankind views the world through a self-limited prism of money above all other concerns.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Eighteen Summary

Eugene painfully recollects how he first examined the folder containing the surveillance photos and information about his affair with Zuzu, Tex Johnson's wife. Forced to view them at his termination hearing while others watched, Eugene is humiliated to see that he and Zuzu were followed for months on end. Their every meeting has been recorded to notebook, along with time, date, location, and other details. There are also many embarrassing photos of them kissing and being intimate. Signed affidavits by leading citizens of the tiny town testify to their ongoing knowledge of the affair between Zuzu and Eugene in no uncertain terms. Realizing he has been thoroughly beaten, Eugene accepts his fate without further debate.

Chapter Eighteen Analysis

Vonnegut's shifting of narrative means that he often revisits earlier scenes and character conflicts, replaying them as if mulling them over in his memory. In Chapter Eighteen, the writer returns the reader to the scene of the public embarrassment of Eugene's firing. By detailing the sickening level of the invasion of his privacy, Vonnegut as author demonstrates how vulnerable and self-deluding the idea of personal privacy is in an age of unregulated technology and social Darwinism run rampant. Even though Eugene has committed no crime and no judge has authorized any surveillance, his employers and even a private citizen Eugene does not know has the power and influence to watch their victim's every step, no matter how salacious. In a world where the wealthy can simply trace every activity of every citizen at will and at very little cost, Vonnegut seems to ask the reader, why bother to fear the government in contrast?

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Nineteen Summary

The charges Eugene now faces and is awaiting trial for are racist, he tells the reader. After all, the only real crime with which the white Eugene is being charged is leading the black prisoners' riot, not merely acting as an accomplice who had a gun literally pointed to his head. Eugene states how he did not participate unless his life was threatened, and how he further advised the rioters they were doomed from the beginning of their efforts, with or without his help. This contrasts sharply with the image the authorities have created of Eugene in the media, in which he had led the riots in an insane act of political rebellion. Eugene scoffs at this notion, and points out that it is racist because it presumes only a white man like himself could have masterminded the riots, not the black men who actually did successfully pull off the initial takeover of Athena prison. Eugene explains how he made a list for his post-life judgement by God. The list Eugene made details all the horrible things he did in life, complete with notes scribbled in the margin justifying and explaining each sin. Eugene's lawyer enjoys reading the list because of the marginal notes scribbled everywhere. He explains to Eugene this is further proof of what he intends to convince the jury, that Eugene is insane, as his legal defense. But Eugene rejects this notion. He patiently explains he really did commit the atrocities outlined in his list. He reiterates these are not the ramblings of a madman, but the confessions of a sane one. His lawyer doesn't care, shrugging and saying, "All the same, all the same."

Chapter Nineteen Analysis

Vonnegut enjoys black comedy as an author. Also known as gallows' humor, the cynical attempt to garner laughs at the most bleak of viewpoints was also a hallmark of one of Vonnegut's professed literary inspirations, Mark Twain. Eugene deconstructs the media fabrication that he as a white man led the less intelligent black men as basically a racist viewpoint because it presumes no black man is so clever. Vonnegut then turns around and shows how the legal system and the courtroom are equally as biased as the media, only against the truth rather than against a person's color. Vonnegut does this as author when he has Eugene show a list of admitted atrocities Eugene committed during the Vietnam War to his legal defense lawyer. Eugene's lawyer should be horrified that his client is newly confessing to murder and even mass killings of civilians, even if during war time. Instead, the lawyer is secretly bemused, stating in so many words that Eugene's actions only prove that Eugene is mentally unfit to stand trial, which is a strategy Eugene's lawyer intends to use during the preliminary legal hearings with the judge. Ironically, of course, the lawyer is saying that if one tells the truth in court, one has grounds to be considered legally insane.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty Summary

At his termination meeting, Eugene has to endure one last insult. Wilder demands to quote Shakespeare into the records as he exits the hearings, calling into question further with his quotes Eugene's worthiness as a man of honor. Eugene reflects about the evening many years previously when he first learned that his wife Mildred and her entire family have a history of severe mental illness. He feels robbed that she didn't reveal this fact to him before they had a child. He remembers when he first was home from the Vietnam conflict and having a lonely dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland. A man had touched Eugene's military-shaved hair and sent Eugene into a rage. A fight had erupted, making a mess of the restaurant. Eugene had fled the scene only to run into Sam Wakefield, who once again just as he had back when Eugene was a boy stopped him with the phrase, "What's the hurry, son?" Again Eugene realizes in retrospect he should have stayed clear of Wakefield, since Wakefield offers Eugene a job at Tarkington College as a result of this encounter outside the restaurant.

Chapter Twenty Analysis

Throughout Hocus Pocus, Eugene feels betrayed. Betrayed by his father, by his country, by his college and finally, even betrayed by himself. For as Eugene admits to the reader repeatedly, he is a failure in every sense of the word, and most especially to his own better instincts. He has murdered innocent people albeit under the color of war. He cheats on his wife, even though he only does so because he is lonely and she cannot make love to him. But whatever else he may tell himself, the one thing Eugene never tries to tell himself is that he is innocent of his own crimes. In this sense, his betrayals by others feel somewhat like a form of karma and revenge being worked out against him. It's as if Vonnegut wants to show the reader that Eugene is having to pay a heavy price on the cosmic scale of human endeavors. He has had to kill women and children in the name of his country, only to feel his country denies it required said actions of him. So when later he is betrayed by his college board of trustees who hired him and then betrayed as well by his wife because she failed to disclose she had a mental illness before they got married, Eugene feels somewhat justified in his own moral failings, as they seem tame in comparison to the ones wrought against him by others. Vonnegut is careful to show that moral relativism, the idea of morality being okay for others but not for oneself, can be a very slippery slope upon which even a well-meaning man like Eugene can slide without much hope of recovery.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-One Summary

Eugene tells the reader about a former student of his who, when he had been a little boy, was taken by his nanny to a department store in a big city. The nanny is not supposed to take the boy away from home on such an errand without first asking permission of his parents. However, because she has personal business to attend at the department store and does not want to ask off for that reason, she instead takes the boy without asking. At the department store, he and his nanny get stuck in an elevator that malfunctions. They are stuck for a long time. The nanny panics, afraid everyone will discover her error in judgment because she broke protocol with the boy. A voice tells them to remain calm and under no circumstances should they try to crawl out, since the store will assume no liability for their well-being if they do so. Finally, the elevator works, bringing them to floor level. They get out, surprised no one is waiting for them. They are completely ignored by the store, as if the incident never happened. The nanny tells the boy to never tell his parents, no matter what, about the incident. Eugene reflects this precisely captures how he felt when first coming home from the Vietnam War.

Chapter Twenty-One Analysis

The entirety of Chapter Twenty-One acts a literary metaphor. In other words, the chapter metaphorically echoes the theme of betrayal running throughout Hocus Pocus by visually distilling the theme into one episode. That episode is when Eugene as a boy and his nanny are caught in a department store elevator. Eugene is clear to show how much of what happened is like what happens to him later as an adult in Vietnam. That is, as soon as he was free of his personal trap in the elevator, no one in the department store even cared he and his nanny had been stuck. Fearful she will be fired, the nanny further tells Eugene to never mention what happened to them in the elevator. Again, Eugene points out how this is how he and other vets from Vietnam felt when they came home. They felt their countrymen denied they had fought in a war, and that their country's leaders told them to never mention what happened in the war.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Two Summary

Eugene tells his court-appointed lawyer that he never swears, he never masturbates and that he loves to clean house. The lawyer is pleased he doesn't curse, since it makes defending him easier, but wonders why not? Eugene tells him that his Grandfather always told him anyone who swears is a weaker-willed and less imaginative man. As if offering proof, his Grandfather always told of a village wherein the town clerk struck the city bells everyday at noon without fail, year in and year out. One day, however, he falls sick and the bells don't ring at high noon. Everyone rushes outside, shouting, "What was that?" Eugene suggests to his lawyer this story tells it all about how the absence of swearing makes a louder sound. Eugene remembers when he was fired from Tarkington, he ran into Sam Wakefield's wife Andrea. Andrea calls Eugene a saint because he remains married to his emotionally-disturbed wife and cares for his equally insane mother-in-law. Eugene tells her it is easier than when he had to lie for his country while telling propaganda in Vietnam. She asks him if he ever found the money his wife took from their savings account and buried one time while in a delusional state, unable to recall later where she had hidden their life's savings. Eugene tells her he has not. He reflects on Tex and how Tex bought a rifle shortly before the prison riot because Tex had a nightmare about Hell's Angels bikers invading town and taking hostages. Tex's purchase included a scope for the rifle that made assassinations from long distances possible. Oddly, Eugene realizes, Tex's premonition came to pass, albeit with a prison riot rather than a biker gang deluge.

Chapter Twenty-Two Analysis

Eugene is a complex man, full of great personal qualities but, sadly, also many negative ones. The good things about him are his honesty, including the way in which he immodestly tells the reader his own good personal qualities. Vonnegut wants the reader to see that while he may have done horrible acts of unpardonable violence during a war, Eugene is not a monster, but a man, and a rather good-willed one, at that. This makes the moral judgments and failings Eugene exemplifies all the more complicated. How much of the responsibility lies within Eugene's control, or society's? And where is society to ask itself the harsh questions when it fails individuals who have advocated for society like Eugene? These are not easy questions, and Vonnegut does not want the reader to leap to any easy answers. We are meant to wrestle with the philosophical nature of reality in this chapter, hence the parable about the clock that didn't strike at noon. Everyone in the village jumped when silence "rang out" instead of the bells. This is Vonnegut commenting upon how rarely humanity pays attention to itself and its surroundings until and unless something goes awry.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Three Summary

Eugene remembers how Tex's dream almost came true in another fashion. The day Arthur K. Clarke, not to be confused with the science fiction writer named Arthur C. Clarke, rode into town on a motorcycle, leading a brigade of others on rented motorcycles. It turns out to be a posse for the entourage accompanying the eccentric millionaire magazine publisher on his day at Tarkington College to accept an honorary degree being bestowed upon him. They rudely take over the town with their arrogance and self-entitlement. The ridiculous overkill of it all makes Eugene recall an earlier event that happened to Pamela, the art teacher with whom he's had an ongoing affair. She once worked for months on a one-woman show that would debut in New York City in a trendy art gallery. Working in foam that is heat-sensitive, however, proves to be an unfortunate miscalculation on her part. After Pamela spends countless hours carefully setting up her foam artwork on pedestals, the media rush in upon official opening. They swing the doors to the gallery so wide open, wind from outside gusts in, blowing over all the foam statues at once. They slide against a heated baseboard and promptly all melt before the horrified artist's eyes, as well as the recording t.v. cameras. Pamela was never the same after the public humiliation, Eugene sadly notes.

Chapter Twenty-Three Analysis

Vonnegut was, as a writer, a great believer in the futility of many, though certainly not all, of mankind's efforts. He uses this chapter to espouse via a clever series of incidents a sort of running commentary on the vanity of men and women. First he delineates the story of a millionaire who is being given an honorary degree by the college, and what a ludicrous circus of human egomania accompanied the wealthy man in the form of an entourage of hangers-on. The man's vanity simply wouldn't allow him to travel without an entire village accompanying him, so great was he. Vonnegut then shifts to tell the same story flipped over, featuring a woman. The woman is an artist who miscalculates and makes her art objects out of a material that melts during her maiden show's exhibition, thus wrecking her career. The woman's vanity never allowed her to consider the frailty of her own art materials nor the setting in which she would exhibit the completed sculptures. While this tale is tragic compared to the tale of the rich man receiving an honorary college degree, both stories render the reader feeling like there is little, if any, chance that fate is fair and proportionately dispenses luck and fortune.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Four Summary

Eugene remembers how Jack Patton once heard a chaplain tell a congregation of soldiers that there were no atheists in a foxhole. Jack Patton snickered and whispered to Eugene that there was a preacher who had never been to the front line of combat where men were actually dying. Eugene remembers how he ran into Pamela one night drinking wine near a tombstone for an old couple from a hundred years' previous existence in the valley. She thanks Eugene for being a part of her happiness while she has been at the college, however meager her allowance of it. He remembers another lover, Zuzu, and how she had been disappointed in him because despite their passionate affair, Eugene didn't marry her and take her away to Venice like he always promised in the bed. Eugene remembers how a professor at the college once asked if Eugene believed a modified Christ riding an unicycle would sell as well as Jesus on a cross. Eugene doubts it, reflecting how he believes the cross represents how stupidly humans will follow orders without question. As if to underscore his bitterness, Eugene tells the reader about how an unsolved murder mystery from the 1920s involves a female student who most likely had been impregnated by the college dean. The girl had mysteriously disappeared when it became visually apparent she was carrying a child, and her remains had never been found. Many decades later, the skull of the missing young student is unearthed during a routine construction project on campus. Though no charges are ever filed because everyone involved has long since died, Eugene believes the evidence is clear that the college official got away with murder.

Chapter Twenty-Four Analysis

Vonnegut doesn't posit a universe where God seemingly has much pity or concern about human affairs. As a result, he opens and closes this chapter with a meditation on the possibility of a personal God, a God that cares about each one of us, via two different metaphorical incidents. The first is a brief summation of the doubt held by his cynical war buddy Jack Patton, whose real-life war experience cancels out the chaplain's rosier assessment about the dying words of a soldier on the front lines. Patton knows from experience many men have died questioning the point of existence, a personal God especially, given the dire nature of their circumstances. This story echoes indirectly in the second tale about the college dean back in the 1920s who gets away with murdering his own female student because the dean has inadvertently impregnated her during their illicit affair. The fact the culprit was so obviously the dean and the fact that the entire faculty and township willingly looked the other way rather than probe too deeply and uncover the obvious truth of the young woman's murder shocks Eugene, but only superficially. Deeper down, Eugene intones this is precisely the kind of self-delusional group behavior he has come to expect from his interactions with human society, no matter how well-intended the organizers may be in their sincerity to do good.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Five Summary

Eugene explains how he once programmed G.R.I.O.T. to determine Pamela's outcome based on her salient personal biography to date. The first result had her dying of a liver disease while still relatively young. Eugene had run the same exact data for Pamela again on G.R.I.O.T. right then and there. The second result had been equally grim, having Pamela die of exposure while homeless. One night, Eugene remembers, he stumbled home drunk and found a box waiting for him, courtesy of the United States military. The young soldier dropping off the package curiously watches as Eugene opens the package. Inside Eugene is surprised to find his personal footlocker from his military days. It has been overdue for delivery to him for years now. Eugene finds a girly magazine called Black Garterbelt inside. After he's alone, Eugene remembers how he read the story inside the magazine that had earlier made an impression on him. The story is called "The Protocols of the Elders of Tralfamadore." The story goes that hundreds of millions of years ago, the Elders of Tralfamadore, an ancient race of intelligent beings, decide to colonize the universe with their wisdom and experience. They decide to use biology by having germs of their own DNA sent to Earth and millions of other intelligence-barren planets. The Elders choose meteors to convey their genetic code to Earth. After the meteorites crash into Earth's primordial seas, the beginning of intelligent life arises on Earth. Though it takes hundreds of millions of years for life to evolve to even primitive mankind level, the Elders are thus-far happy they have succeeded in basically colonizing Earth without homo sapiens even realizing they are present amongst them.

Chapter Twenty-Five Analysis

The invented science fiction short story about the aliens from Tralfamadore is essential to understanding Hocus Pocus as a thematic whole. That is, because Hocus Pocus is very scattered in terms of narrative structure, going back and forth in time throughout the narrator's memory, the short story Vonnegut invents becomes a thematic distillation of his larger purpose as a writer. In the fictional short story is the essence of the larger work, in that it shows how invisible, intelligent overlords ruthlessly but imperceptibly influence lesser beings, forcing them over time to do their bidding. In the science fiction story's case, the overlords are clearly fantastical beyond belief. They are aliens from other dimensions in time and space beyond human comprehension. But notice how the fictional Tralfamadore rulers are replaced in the main story by such characters as the United States government, the board of trustees of Tarkington College, and other power structures wherein authorities dictate to larger, subservient groups of humans how to behave, even whom to kill in a war. And so while the aliens seem comically absurd, they actually operate in term's of the story's construction just as do the larger social and societal forces Eugene later combats in his life's story.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Six Summary

The Elders of Tralfamadore belittle the human efforts to go beyond the planet, however, Eugene cautions the reader. Rather than believe humans are the superior life forms, Tralfamadoreans believe humans are pathetic pieces of "meat" and self-delusional maniacs. One writer on the home planet of Tralfamadore, in fact, becomes an instant celebrity when he writes a series of satires for his fellow citizens about how humans actually believe themselves superior to all other life forms in the universe. The Elders also enjoy the fearful way in which humans will divide up and blame one another's group for all their problems rather than banding together to actually solve them. This makes it easy for the Elders to rule over the unknowing Earthlings, who idiotically allow themselves to be herded around with fear and superstition by their absentee rulers. In a perverse variation on the economic Trickle Down Theory, Eugene says that the Elders actually don't want humans to do anything in the overall scheme of their plans to dominate the Earth but accelerate the decline of the environment. The Elders correctly see that the humans are very good at destroying life on Earth, and therefore, reducing all remaining life to microbes in nature. The latter is precisely what the Elders desire, since then they can claim the planet as their own entirely devoid of all other forms of life save for themselves as a genetic slop that permeates the entire world. Then and only then, when a meteorite strikes the planet and/or the Earth gives up pieces in catastrophic explosions, the DNA of the Elders will once again be space borne, and they will once again be on their way to dominating the universe. Humanity is but a small, temporary stage in their master plan. Sufficiently spooked by the story's parallels to his own modern reality, Eugene concludes to the reader that he is very glad his tuberculosis will continue on beyond his own mortality to it. It is a kind of weird proof the story has some actual relevance in Eugene's world.

Chapter Twenty-Six Analysis

Vonnegut extends the metaphorical analogy of the Elders of Tralfamadore as being the equivalent of the ruling class of the real world around Eugene in Chapter Twenty-Six, building on the basic themes from the previous chapter in this regard. The so-called Trickle Down Theory that Eugene goes to great lengths to discredit is the by-product of the American president Reagan's economic shift of favoring the wealthy over the working classes in terms of tax structure and overall share of the economic rewards. Vonnegut explicitly links this decision and the Thatcher year equivalents in the UK as precursors to all the decline and social inequality that has occurred since the respective policies were enacted. It is rare for a writer to tackle such political situations without moderation in fiction, particularly famous and celebrated ones such as Vonnegut was during his own lifetime. Given Hocus Pocus was written far in advance of today's social strife in which many feel the upper class are advantaged over the masses, it is

interesting to note that when Vonnegut wrote Hocus Pocus such beliefs were not as common nor current as they are presently.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Seven Summary

Eugene reflects on a time before the prison riot when he had first been let go from Tarkington but hadn't yet been hired at Athena prison. He blackly stumbled along in the dark until he came across a bike. The bike is a ten-speed and expensive, and yet, Eugene finds it left in the bushes, unattended. He imagines that it has been stolen by a poor person from a rich kid who doesn't even miss it, probably. Eugene takes the bike and rides it to a local tavern called the Black Cat Cafe. It is the first time he ever sets foot in the place, because it has a reputation as being a seedy bar in the community and thus not to be frequented by respectable persons. Eugene recalls that later at Athena, when he had been employed there to help illiterate inmates learn how to read, he often discovered they had been damaged in childhood by exposure to lead paint in their various poverty-stricken backgrounds. Did they ever even have a chance not to become mentally unstable, Eugene wonders.

Chapter Twenty-Seven Analysis

Chapter Twenty-Seven pivots the story so that Eugene can finally explore the reasons why he refused to acknowledge the existence of Athena Prison while he was on the faculty of Tarkington College. After all, the two institutions share a common plot of large land, separated only by an expansive lake. But the townies of Tarkington go about their daily business as if the prison population so close and yet so far away from their own ideal lives doesn't even exist. Eugene admits to the reader he had been just as biased against admitting to the disturbing reality of the prison. Is this because he had been just was too busy with his own life, as Eugene recounts telling himself at the time, or is it really because all of the prisoners at Athena are poor and black, while most of the faculty at Tarkington College are upscale and white? Eugene knows the latter is the real reason. His tells the reader how some of the prisoners he taught to read later had all been exposed to lead paint as children, which causes brain damage so that the reader sees Eugene's vision. Eugene sees the larger cycle, from birth to death, and concludes society has basically doomed most of the prisoners to their fates from the beginning of their lives.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Eight Summary

The Black Cat Cafe owner Lyle Hooper had been an industrious man prior to the Athena prison riots, Eugene remembers. Hooper not only managed the bar and patrons of the Cafe, but equally ran prostitutes in the parking lot to cater to local men gone astray for the evening. The respectable folks in the Mohiga Valley look the other way, including the women. They pretend that Lyle Hooper's clear financial success is the result of hard work and disciplined saving, and not the fact he runs the local whorehouse, which is what the prisoners of Athena call it. When they later riot and take Lyle Hooper as a captive, Eugene recalls, they will begin calling him "Pimp" because of their disdain for his former, true occupation. Eugene laments that Hooper was doomed from the moment he shot and killed a rioting prisoner that fateful night. Hooper is decreed by the rioters who call themselves Freedom Fighters and sentenced to death. Throughout the accusations and name-calling, however, Hooper refuses to ever admit he ran a house of ill repute. But as he is led to his final moments, he utters an epitaph which Eugene believes should have been placed on his headstone for all to read: "Okay, I admit it. It really was a whorehouse."

Chapter Twenty-Eight Analysis

Vonnegut underscores the futility of current American social thinking and belief when he focuses this chapter on Lyle Hooper, the reluctant pimp. Ironically and tragically, Hooper can never admit to himself that the reason he drives a fancy car and has a son who is even more successful than himself is not because he ran a respectable bar, but because he used said bar as a front for a house of prostitution. In other words, Hooper is the classic successful businessman who has rationalized his success at the expense of his own integrity. This is a classic character archetype of American satirical and social fiction. Hooper is so in denial of the reality of his life, he won't admit to it until moments before his execution during his death bed confession. Vonnegut's satire of the typical American is as vicious as it is transparent. The reader does not have to extrapolate much to see Vonnegut's larger point that most Americans are just like Hooper, working blindly as metaphorical prostitutes making money for others who actually control them.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Twenty-Nine Summary

Eugene further states he believes Hooper's dying admission he was running nothing beyond a whorehouse is fitting for anyone who has ever had a job in the industrialized world. All jobs make prostitutes of their workers, he believes. But Eugene doesn't blame humanity, since he sees it as a case of there being so few good choices, people make bad ones because they're easier to make on face value. Speaking of which, Eugene remembers meeting Muriel in the Black Cate Cafe that evening. Because Muriel's husband is dying and in a wheelchair, she is tempted to have an affair with Eugene, whom she knows is equally unfulfilled because of his mate's insanity. But just as the two get intimate, a man bursts inside, screaming to know where is the kid who stole the bicycle parked outside. It turns out to be his bike, and he believes some juvenile delinquent has taken it. Eugene plays dumb and offers the theory that some college kid at Tarkington took it and abandoned it after a harmless joy ride, never admitting he rode it for that very reason himself. The man is calmed and mentions to Eugene, when he learns Eugene is a teacher, that Athena prison is hiring teachers. The man invites Eugene to come along with him since he needs a teaching job, too, but only if Eugene promises not to apply for the same position as the man himself. Eugene is dumbfounded at his good luck and accompanies the man, agreeing to his simple terms.

Chapter Twenty-Nine Analysis

Fate, as always in Hocus Pocus, plays a heavy hand in Chapter Twenty-Nine. Just when Eugene has been fired for having affairs with the wives of board members and branded a traitor by zealots within the college's power structures, he decides to impulsively steal a bike and take a joy ride. He winds up at Hooper's bar/prostitution cafe, whereupon the owner of the stolen bike appears. Through a canny use of his wits, Eugene avoids a beating. Instead, he turns the chance encounter with the bike's owner into a strange advantage. The man tells Eugene the prison is hiring, and even offers Eugene a lift there to be interviewed for the job. Throughout Hocus Pocus and whenever Eugene has been in a point of spiritual crisis, sudden helpers have appeared and offered him guidance as to his future plans. But as Eugene reflects, his life would have turned out much better in all likelihood if he had not accepted these spontaneous offers with equally reckless abandon on his own part.

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty Summary

Eugene explains that most folks cannot understand why the rioters could not relate to the prison guards at Athena. He tells the reader that it is because the Japanese company that bought Athena fired all the local guards and imported only young Japanese men with military experience. Furthermore, the Japanese prison owners have imported only young men from the Hokkaido region. Here, in a rare genetic anomaly to the rest of Japan, Caucasians are dominant rather than people of Asian ancestry. There is a long and brutal history of oppression of the light-skinned people by the Japanese people, Eugene notes. He believes this makes the young men more easily programmable by the prison owners because they've grown up accustomed to being treated as second class citizens themselves. In other words, they know how to treat others badly because they've been treated badly since childhood, as well. Eugene remembers how he saw himself or someone who looked a lot like himself on the t.v. in old newsreel footage of the Vietnam War sometimes on the Athena prison t.v., which only showed old videotapes in order to control the prisoners' moods. But whenever he would shout for others to see him on the television, his image would be gone by the time they actually looked up. Eugene laments that he feels as if he were invisible after awhile, because he is the only one who ever saw himself on the t.v.

Chapter Thirty Analysis

Everything that Eugene and his alter ego, the writer Vonnegut, loved about America is vanishing. Eugene laments that too many foreign owners of formerly solvent American institutions such as the prisons, businesses and universities means that personal freedoms are vanishing along with the rapid sales. This sense of change is underscored when Eugene relates how he once saw himself on t.v. at the prison. The old combat footage shows Eugene back when he was in Vietnam commanding troops. Ironically, by the time Eugene can alert the prisoners, they don't see him. This makes Eugene feel as if he alone can remember events that no longer are visible or meaningful to others around him. Vonnegut could not have constructed a better metaphorical way of showing Eugene's alienation from himself and his world, which is a major theme of Hocus Pocus.

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-One Summary

Eugene believes a good episode for one of the old rerun videotapes of the "Donahue" interview t.v. show would have been to have featured a show about humans who have had to resort to eating other humans as a topic. Eugene recalls the Donner Party, an infamous, true-life case in which some American pioneers became stuck in the western mountains during a snowstorm and were forced to eat the remains of their party who succumbed to hunger in order to survive themselves. He remembers how the new Japanese owners of the prison installed the highest-quality t.v. monitors throughout the prison as part of their upgrade to the facility. The Japanese owners' theory was that if the prisoners had docile old video images on every surface they viewed while housed inside the prison, they would be less likely to feel entrapped and more likely to go along with the owners' agenda. Warden Matsumoto is a kind but stern-faced man who is impressed by Eugene's credentials when Matsumoto interviews him. Matsumoto believes that in order to keep the prisoners' minds from rotting while imprisoned, they need to be educated enough to read and write, many for the first time in their lives. Eugene actually relates to Matsumoto when he learns the Japanese prison warden experienced the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 as a child. A lone survivor from his entire block, Matsumoto was severely burned but lived to become the head of an American prison full of American citizens, in an ironic twist. But Matsumoto does not feel any undue anger towards these Americans, realizing they had nothing to do with the decision and that they were all born after the war itself. Matsumoto, in turn, respects the horrors Eugene has faced as a Vietnam War veteran, so the two get along well together, albeit without much conversation.

Chapter Thirty-One Analysis

Eugene tells the reader that the prisoners are basically blinded and cannot see the reality around them. Not just because they are locked away, but because they are subject to watching closed loops of old t.v. shows. In essence, this is not unlike Plato's "Parable of the Cave" in which prisoners are locked inside a cave and watch a shadow play on the wall, never realizing they're watching shadows because they believe they're seeing reality in the silhouettes moving in front of them. This is Vonnegut's way of metaphorically showing how society equally blinds itself to the possibility of change for the better in favor of watching the ever-shifting shadow play on t.v., instead. The prisoners are actually the working classes in America who are 'imprisoned' in their own ignorance and fear, and the closed loop of old Donahue t.v. shows the prisoners are forced to watch is actually the banal programming one encounters on t.v. such as reality t.v. shows, infomercials, and other offerings.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Two Summary

Eugene speculates that given how racist many white people are in the Mohiga Valley, it is amazing that only one non-rioting black citizen of the town was mistakenly shot as a prisoner on the lam. In fact, it turns out that during the prison riot, a young black man whose father held elective office was injured slightly in the hand, shot at by police mistaking him for a prisoner on the run. The rest of the prisoners who were killed during the riot were all black but actual prisoners, so the law was within its right to shoot them, even if they were largely unarmed and in very small numbers. Eugene tells the reader he is grateful that although the prison riot was once big news, it has now died down and is largely forgotten, as is his fate awaiting trial. Matsumoto once told Eugene, Eugene remembers, that the American ruling class had set a trap for the Japanese. The trap, the warden believed, was that the American elite would sell out all the corporations to whomever would buy them from abroad, and load up the American government with so much debt that no chance of it ever being able to actually be streamlined and efficient could ever be the working reality. It is a cynical worldview, but Eugene has to admit to himself and the reader, largely accurate based on his personal and professional experience, much as he would perhaps like to deny it. As a soldier in Vietnam, he experienced the horrible truth that as long as the American invaders didn't personalize the Vietnamese citizens as equal beings, they felt free to slaughter them without guilt or remorse. Likewise, Matsumoto's view has been shaped by his wandering the flattened city of Hiroshima after the Americans atomic bombed it when he was a child. As he had staggered across the mass bodies of dead civilians, Matsumoto gleamed early on that man's inhumanity to man exceeds anything nature itself can visit upon our species.

Chapter Thirty-Two Analysis

Chapter Thirty-Two is perhaps the bleakest chapter yet, and given the dark nature of much of Hocus Pocus, this means it strives to shake the reader by author design. Trickle Down Theory is made explicitly inexplicable by Vonnegut, wherein he deconstructs how the process actually works versus how it is presented to the gullible American people. Because they are working for less than their share of rewards and allowing the rich to make money from money rather than creative enterprise, a majority of the American working poor and former middle class are, de facto, merely voting for their own indentured servitude. Vonnegut points out that the debts have been artificially and deliberately driven up by the ruling class so that the public cannot turn to its own government to take any meaningful action. Given the current political climate in the United States, Vonnegut seems positively prescient herein. The coda to this chapter in which the Japanese warden remembers the horrors of wandering through an atom-bombed Hiroshima underscore the idea that the ruling class in one country is willing to kill any number of innocent men, women and children in order to have its way in history.

It is a powerfully depressing realization Vonnegut states, but he uses ironic comments by Eugene to help alleviate the harshness of what is being said.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Three Summary

Eugene states that moving from the college town to the prison town didn't make much of a difference, when he reflects upon it. His wife and mother-in-law had been content to move from one small cottage home to the next. Since they never go outside and keep the window shades drawn day and night, it is as if they never even left the former Tarkington College abode. Eugene tells the reader of an anti-Semitic black prisoner he once taught who was reading a viciously anti-Jewish book called The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This infamous tome, an actual historical oddity, turned out to be the forged works of people so opposed to Jewish banking they wrote a false book. The book supposedly tells of a secret meeting between all the Jewish bankers and power brokers in the world, who agree to lead the countries into debt, wars, and disasters in order to gain control of the world's power structures for themselves. Eugene laments the sad irony of the fact he is teaching illiterate men to read, and that they choose to read and then believe what are known to be outright lies. Eugene recalls once when he was in Vietnam and tossed a grenade into a ditch where a woman and her baby were hiding, because they had shown the audacity to escape from their village which Eugene and his soldiers had just incinerated from above with a helicopter brigade.

Chapter Thirty-Three Analysis

Often the author of Hocus Pocus likes to build the proverbial riddle within a mystery within a conundrum. Or put more succinctly, he enjoys having the same themes weave in and out of the narrative repeatedly, so much so that it often takes a very skillful later reading of the text in order to see how craftily Vonnegut has accomplished this literary sleight of hand. For example, in Chapter Thirty-Three, Eugene talks about the fake science fiction story "The Protocols of the Elders of Trafalmadore" and simultaneously the notorious actual anti-Semitic text called The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. By confusing the two deliberately, the writer forces the reader to understand each more crucially and in contrast to one another as concepts. Vonnegut asks the reader to speculate with him to the effect that if one book was so believed it led to Hilter and others believing it was true enough to launch a genocide against the Jews, why shouldn't the reader believe a short story equally outlandish as one about aliens invading the Earth by making humans turn on one another? Belief, in and of itself, becomes suspect in this kind of thinking. What is truly the source of the Jewish concentration camps in WW2, the false Protocols story about the Jews written by their enemies to harm them, or the real world actions subsequently taken by fanatics like the Nazis based on the original fabrications? Isn't it true, the author seems to ask, that both fantasy and fact feed one another, often to terrible conclusions that no one anticipated, when the original source is a lie instead of the truth?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Four Summary

Eugene continues telling the reader how disappointing it was to achieve a literacy rate of 20% at the prison. While this is considered quite respectable given most couldn't read or write, Eugene again laments their choices are largely as ignorant as their former illiteracy. He cites how the prisoners were fascinated with The Guiness Book of World Records. Because the book contains records of finite if often dubious distinction, Eugene recalls, the prisoners had found it comforting, as a sort of cultural version of the Bible. It had given them a worldview wherein all the great mysteries are answered and orderly. The world's richest person, the world's tallest person, and even the world's longest living person are all there, to be known, if one but asks. Because Eugene housed next to warden Matsumoto near the lakeside in the neighboring cottage, Eugene remembers the quiet man with some bemusement, especially the Japanese man's belief that Mohiga Valley is the "anus of the universe." Eugene states that on the night of the riot, Matsumoto tried to ride up to the prison in a jeep but lost control of it in the ice and snow. He was able to hide out and escape being killed by the rioting prisoners, but the effort caused gangrene to set into his exposed feet. As a result, he would later lose some toes as the price for his surviving that fateful night.

Chapter Thirty-Four Analysis

Again, Eugene's lament that so many of the blacks housed in Athena Prison are severely deprived when it comes to education is born out by the fact that so few ever learn to read and write, even with his direct tutelage. But ironically, Eugene points out that even when they become literate, they often choose such absolute reference guides as The Guiness Book of World Records because it gives them safe limits within which they can imagine the world a finite, closed place. Eugene seems to believe such linear thinking is at the root of their problems. Instead of critically reasoning for themselves in a given situation, the prisoners would rather have an authoritative source, such as the Guiness Book, tell them who is number one in a certain category. What if they were to imagine creative solutions instead of easy answers, Eugene basically concludes.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Five Summary

The Battle of Scipio, as Eugene dubs it, lasted five days and nights before the local authorities took control and shot the rioters to death. Eugene relates how he hid out and avoided being captured until the morning after the night the so-called Freedom Fighters first rioted. Eugene tells the reader about three older inmates who are lifers. When the rioted occurred, these men had been unable to participate. They could no longer imagine a world beyond the prison walls. Eugene has to tell them what has happened re: the riots, since the elderly men are too shell-shocked to understand. Eugene recalls how he had seen his wife Margaret briefly come out of her insane psychosis the night of the rioting when he stopped by their cottage to check on her and her mother. Margaret is convinced Eugene is going to leave her to see another woman. He is moved by her jealousy because most of the time, she never even admits his presence, let alone any feelings for him as a human being or her husband. He tells her he loves her repeatedly and leaves. He lets the reader know he never spoke to his wife again, and these were the last words she ever heard from him as he departed from her for good. Eugene tells the reader how he had gone to the prison and turned himself into the rioters, feeling it his duty to do so as an employee of the prison and directly charged with their welfare. He tries to tell them to quit their insane acts of violence, but the Freedom Fighters are not interested in any talk of peace.

Chapter Thirty-Five Analysis

In many ways, Chapter Thirty-Five is the story's climax. This is because Eugene finally hears from his wife after many years of insanity that she loves him. Or at least, that she is jealous of him seeing another woman. Because she has been in clinical denial of all reality and therefore has abandoned Eugene both as a friend and a lover, Eugene is stunned to hear her break her silence in which she never speaks of personal issues and acts like a jealous wife. Eugene is touched because it shows him a brief glimmer of hope in an otherwise wrecked human being. This forces Eugene to consider the possibility that however briefly, there is always the positive moment of recognition between two loving people such as himself and his wife, no matter how many years of acrimony lay between them. In other words, Eugene sees and feels that redemption is actually still possible. This is a hope he has long since abandoned before the story begins, and so when Eugene admits this moment moves him, he is admitting to the reader he has grown as a human being because of the story's events.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Six Summary

Eugene recalls his conversation with the head of the rioting Freedom Fighters, Alton Darwin. Darwin had told Eugene of his plans to turn the newly-freed republic of Scipio into a paradise where ex-convicts turned Freedom Fighters like himself could make an armed, resistant stand against the occupying American government. He tells Eugene of his plans to turn the surrounding forests into paper mills and furniture companies, thus employing the Freedom Fighters once the fighting is over as craftsmen who can produce goods they sell themselves. Eugene feels pity for Darwin, because Eugene knows from his experience in Vietnam there is no chance of Darwin's men not being slaughtered by the authorities. Indeed, as Eugene states to the reader, Darwin was dead not long after telling Eugene of his grand vision for Scipio, shot to death while ice skating outside his occupied office. Now, Eugene ironically notes, the Scipio Valley forests are being mowed down just as Darwin wanted to do. The difference, Eugene tells the reader, is that it is being done by international companies and not American or American-based businesses.

Chapter Thirty-Six Analysis

Echoing on the earlier themes of racism and lack of opportunity, Eugene focuses on Darwin, an appropriately named black leader of the rioting prisoners. Darwin is clearly as mentally unbalanced as his plans are grandiose beyond measure. Ironically, however, this doesn't make him seem that much different to Eugene than all the other supposedly balanced leaders he's met and had the misfortune to serve beneath. Having seen so much death up close as a young man in Vietnam, Eugene knows immediately that the rioters are all dead men walking. He goes about efficiently serving whomever is in charge, moment to moment, which is Vonnegut's damning of Eugene as a character. Eugene lacks the self-courage to ever say no to anyone. While Eugene would like to believe this is an asset, Vonnegut seems to conclude, it all too often is rather Eugene's biggest liability. He refuses to take moral stands and thus becomes a victim to whatever false morality is popular in the moment.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Seven Summary

Eugene remembers that after the authorities had shot and killed the Freedom Fighters, the hostages were rescued. Eugene details how they were airlifted by helicopter off the roof of the prison. He tells the reader this reminds him precisely of how the American military had to retreat in the fall of Saigon in the 1970s when Eugene was still in command. In fact, Eugene had been on the very helicopters that departed Saigon during the overthrow of the Americans by the communist-backed Vietnamese fighters, he recalls. As he helped load the hostages, he had shared a seat next to a young woman physicist who has applied for a job at Tarkington College the day before the riots. Dr. Helen Dole tells Eugene how she probably wouldn't have gotten the job anyway, because she told the board of trustees who interviewed her that she thinks of most white people as "European settlers." Furthermore, that most of these "settlers" are robbers and had taken lands from indigenous people they killed if the previous land dwellers offered resistance. She tells Eugene about a Spaniard overthrow of a Caribbean-based tribe of formerly free people. Under the Spaniards, they have been turned into slaves. Their Leader is asked to kiss a crucifix before he is sacrificed to show the others their fates as slaves is not negotiable. The Leader asks why he should do this. He is told because he will go to a heaven then after his death rather than a hell. The Leader asks if white people will be in heaven. They will be, he is told. The Leader decides, in that case, he wants to die without kissing the cross. He is burned alive but without admitting to the European conquistadors that their religion is superior to his own.

Chapter Thirty-Seven Analysis

Taking the earlier themes of damnation of the American document of so-called Manifest Destiny, in which the United States and its settlers took what they wanted and later negotiated with surviving victims of former lands and possessions, Vonnegut indulges in demonstrating history not from a Caucasian European point of view complete with conquistadors and the like, but from the vantage of the peoples who were often slaughtered into near extinction as a result of their contact with the white settlers over time and endless expansions westward. The bitter tale told of the Leader wishing to die without going to a white man's heaven is heartbreaking because it vividly demonstrates how conquest as a strategy results in a terrible legacy, whereas cooperation results in a much better outcome according to history.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Eight Summary

Dr. Dole tells Eugene how much she also dislikes her own country of Berlin, where she had been residing prior to her interview at Tarkington College the day before the riots. Eugene defends America, saying at least citizens here have free speech. Dr. Dole laughs and counters that free speech is not given to someone, but something they must assert for themselves in order for it to have any meaning. She implies that few and far between are the Americans who use free speech as anything more than a grumbling here and there. Eugene introduces a final character to his narrative in the form of Harley Wheelock III, a hostage who manages to free himself and avail Eugene's help during the riots. Wheelock's father served in Vietnam, and Wheelock figures himself something of a rightwing action hero type. He takes command of the situation, telling Eugene to assume a subordinate position to help Wheelock carry out order post-rioting. Eugene argues he is not qualified to lead men. Wheelock uses the radio to reach the Governor of the state of New York. The Governor deputizes Wheelock and therefore Eugene on the spot, thereby giving Eugene the authority he claimed to lack. For a few hours before he is falsely arrested for having aided the Freedom Fighters, Eugene is once again a commissioned officer working to help oppress people for the wealthy elite.

Chapter Thirty-Eight Analysis

Eugene never accounts for his own passivity in key moments of his life. Here is one great example. He first allows the rioters to have their day and take him under their spell, taking claim of the prison in the name of their losing political cause to become free men. Next, he allows a right-wing establishment type to take control of destiny and conscript him into basically becoming a deputy to arrest and house the very rioters he was earlier assisting. This lack of standing firm for any set of personal convictions, Eugene intones, is why Eugene and in a larger context America as a country have suffered so much for the last few decades. The lack of conviction means they are free to follow a trail of seeking personal enrichment, never personal fulfillment.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Thirty-Nine Summary

As part of his newly conscripted duties, Eugene must help the local police excavate the graves where many of the Freedom Fighters were hurriedly buried under the orders of Wheelock during the riots. Eugene remembers how one morning, after the bodies have been recovered, there is a noisy commotion. He is startled to see General Florio, who commands a small company of soldiers. They secure Tarkington College and slowly but surely turn it into a tent city compound, in effect making it a prison just like Athena. They put up barbed wire and control anyone coming and going. Damon Stern, a famous author and lecturer at Tarkington, was one of the victims who died during the riots, Eugene remembers. His wife Wanda June survives but decides not to claim her husband's body, because she just wants to leave the past behind her. Eugene is surprised that while he awaits trial, a man claiming to be his son arrives to see him, the only visitor he receives. He tells the guards his son Eugene Jr. will never talk to him, so Eugene doubts the visitor's claim. It turns out the visitor calls himself Rob Roy and that he is the illegitimate son of a romance Eugene had in Vietnam with a foreign war correspondent. Rob Roy's mother never told Eugene, so the fact he has another son stuns the older father. They grow closer during their one and only visit until Rob Roy reveals that he has been arrested for child molestation previously. Despite himself, Eugene's interest in his newly-found son evaporates in the face of Rob Roy's admission that he is guilty of the crime, as well.

Chapter Thirty-Nine Analysis

Eugene's description of the military encampment that grows up around the college makes it obvious Vonnegut is attempting to compare the prison across the lake and the virtual imprisonment of the intellectual in the post-Reagan years in the United States. In essence, both the poor and the enlightened have felt imprisoned in their respective encampments, neither happy with the direction their country has taken them. Eugene is forced to meet a son he never had soon thereafter. This emotionally charged meeting forces Eugene to see that life has more mysteries and surprises in store for him and other human beings than he could ever cynically believe are not possible. Before Eugene can celebrate his good fortune, however, he learns his newly-discovered son is also a child molester, and a willing one, at that. Just when Eugene believed life was giving him a break, his fortune once again plummets, leaving him feeling a new depth of personal despair.

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty Summary

Eugene concludes his sad tale of woe. He says that Matsumoto committed hara-kiri in Japan years after the riot, depressed by his declining health. Eugene recalls how General Florio arrested him one day for the crime of insurrection. Eugene says Matsumoto's death hit him hard because Matsumoto was a truly innocent man who never committed any offenses as far as Eugene ever witnessed. It seems as if Matsumoto's suicide is a rebuke of life's horrors, Eugene believes. Eugene recalls how he once asked Matsumoto why the warden never left the tiny prison town on weekends. The warden tells him it would be pointless to do so, because he would only meet more people. The warden states he wishes all humans had been born as birds. He sincerely believes the world would have been a better place if so. Eugene finishes his tale with a cautionary statement: "Just because some of us can read and do a little math, that doesn't mean we deserve to conquer the universe."

Chapter Forty Analysis

Eugene feels the need to tie up loose ends. However, the more he neatly tries to make all the various narrative strands easily conclude to dramatic effect on demand, the less they actually seem to do so to the reader. Or to Eugene, for that matter. And most probably, Vonnegut as author, as well. Vonnegut and therefore Eugene as his spokesman seem to believe that life goes on, no matter the consequences or not assigned to those who lived it, and that wishful thinking is just that, an indulgent form of daydreaming. He cautions with his final lines that although humanity can be a blessing for those wise enough to realize its severe limitations, it does not therefore grant us as a species the right to believe we can determine the destiny of others. As the narrator Eugene has shown repeatedly throughout the telling of Hocus Pocus, we humans are ever eager to self-deceive ourselves into the next war, famine or man-made disaster.

Characters

Eugene Debs Hartke

Eugene Debs Hartke is the narrator of Hocus Pocus. He is named after the famed socialist labor leader. Eugene is a very cynical ex-college professor in his mid-life awaiting trial for aiding the conspirators in a prison riot, which he did not in fact actually do. But what Eugene has done throughout the rest of his life makes him so guilty of other crimes against humanity, one questions whether or not Eugene has had a free ride until this moment of reckoning in his life.

The worst of Eugene's sins are that he killed innocent women and children while serving active tours of combat in Vietnam. While this is somewhat excusable as acts of duress committed during a war, there is no doubt in Eugene's mind or the reader's after his confession that he is guilty of murder. Furthermore, Eugene reminds the reader that he is relatively morally balanced compared to many who served and killed civilians with abandon during their tours of duty.

Eugene's quest throughout Hocus Pocus therefore becomes to lead a moral life as an act of self-redemption. While he is not above getting drunk and having affairs with lonely women as part of his failings, Eugene does not believe these are on the same magnitude as killing non-combatants and so chooses not to judge himself or others on these personal matters. Rather, Eugene comes to see, as the story progresses and he reflects of his life's many twists, that if he had acted with such moral clarity and purpose earlier in his life, he might have amounted to something other than a national figure of disgrace. The story becomes a cautionary warning told by a man who concludes his own life was probably best left non-lived, at least given the poor choices he made while he lived it.

Margaret Patton

Margaret Patton is Eugene's wife. When Margaret first meets Eugene as a young woman, she fails to disclose to him her family's long, tragic history of mental illness. Later both she and her mother become insane and require long-term, in-home care, which Eugene is forced to provide. Margaret's form of mental illness basically makes her reclusive from society. She spends most of her time inside a dark home with the drapes drawn, fearful of contact with the outside world. She and her mother Mildred Patton feed on one another's insanity, cut off from reality and stranded together. Eugene still very much loves Margaret, or rather, the memory of the loving person she was before her mental illness permanently took her from him.

Throughout Hocus Pocus, Margaret will cast a long shadow over the events that transpire. This is because she forces Eugene to always be the provider and therefore accept responsibility not only for their financial well-being but equally she and her invalid

mother's health care and maintenance. Eugene dutifully does precisely this, even going so far as to clean the house for Margaret and Mildred. Margaret spends the entirety of the book as nothing but a comatose, nearly vegetative human being, forcing both Eugene and the reader to project onto her character the person who once was and might have been. She is a tragic non-character, in essence, whose absence becomes achingly painful to Eugene because he is still very much in love with her.

When Margaret briefly awakens from her zombie-like spell towards the end of the novel, Eugene is thrilled. He feels alive, fully alive, again for the first time in years. He tells her passionately that he loves her, but isn't sure whether or not Margaret hears him before she slips back into mental insanity.

Father

Eugene's father remains nameless throughout the book, referred to only by his role as Father rather than a name. This both elevates Father's status in the narrative and reduces his character in Eugene's eyes, as well. The elevation occurs because calling him Father makes Eugene's biological dad seem like he's omnipotent, that he has powers greater than mere mortals. Likewise, such a vaunted view of his father makes Eugene feel distanced and cold emotionally from his dad, because who can relate to a God in human form, as Eugene blindly does prior to seeing his father truly as he is for the first time at the science fair event. When Father is caught cheating and Eugene realizes how deeply his father has manipulated him, Eugene's unrealistic view of Father abruptly changes from saint to fallen angel.

Father will have a profound effect on Eugene's life. Father not only taints Eugene with cynical observations about the world that are not balanced with hopeful ones, but he also cheats at the science fair, unfairly pressuring Eugene into becoming his unwilling accomplice. This colors Eugene's world view and makes him skeptical of all authority figures thereafter. Father dies with Mother in a tragic death near Niagara Falls.

Aaron Tarkington

Aaron Tarkington was the founder of Tarkington College and early settler in the Mohiga Valley of New York, where much of the action takes place. He was a builder of covered wagons that took many settlers into hostile Western lands during the early land rush years of America's formation. Because a genetic condition known as dyslexia runs in the Tarkington family, the clan has never been properly educated, despite the fact they are self-taught men and women. Dyslexia causes a person to see words in reverse order, rather like a mirror in effect. Because this disorder requires the person afflicted with it to slowly reverse the words in their minds, they tend to be very slow readers. Aaron's disorder drives the very genesis of the story, because once he becomes a wealthy man, Aaron decides he will build a college that does not discriminate against anyone for any reason such as genetic inheritance. Aaron leaves his lands to build a private college that will remain very small in nature and never fail to self-sustain by selling off parcels of

the valley to private investors from time-to-time and using the proceeds to fund the college in perpetuity.

Elias Tarkington

Elias Tarkington is the son of Aaron. Elias helps the Mohiga Valley grow even faster. He is a capable and adept businessman, but he is lonely. He never marries and spends most of his life recovering from a dreadful wound received in the battle fields of the Civil War when he is mistaken for being Abraham Lincoln. Elias survives the assassination attempt but is forever thereafter in poor health. Though he helps the college and valley prosper, he is otherwise a bit of an eccentric, as witnessed by the numerous perpetual motion machines he has his engineering students continuously design and construct.

Mother

Mother is the name Eugene gives to his mom. She is very much a shadowy figure throughout the book, relegated to basically a supporting status for Father as dutiful and silent wife. Her only real claim to success besides the birth of Eugene is that she lost a lot of weight and went from being obese to in shape. She dies in a tragic accident near Niagara Falls along with Father.

Sam Wakefield

Sam Wakefield is a friend of Father's and knows Eugene since Eugene's birth. Sam is a very pro-military man and urges Eugene to join the military, which Eugene does with Father's blessing. Sam is very much a follower and does well in Vietnam, moving up the ranks because he has the innate ability to look the other way and not see the atrocities that occur around him. Later Sam encounters Eugene when Eugene is very much on the down and out. Here again Sam "rescues" Eugene and this time steers Eugene into becoming a teacher at Tarkington College. Sam is a decorated vet from World War II and Eugene expresses admiration for Sam's having fought in an honorable war versus the horrors of Vietnam he encountered while on duty. Sam later commits suicide and leaves a plagiarized note.

Jack Patton

Jack Patton is Eugene's brother-in-law. Jack is very tough and talks it. He believes everything is a cosmic joke and the laugh is mostly at humanity's expense. Jack's catchphrase response to every bad situation is that he would "laugh like hell" at it if he had the muster. But he mostly remains silent and does what he is told to do by others. He dies in combat during Vietnam.

Alton Darwin

Alton Darwin is the leader of the rioting prisoners. He is self-appointed as such but the others largely follow him. Alton is a former drug dealer who has been convicted and sent away for life. He has learned to read while in Athena Prison, largely because of Eugene's teaching. Alton believes that the society he lives in is so racist that the only way he and other black men can be free in America is to have their own reservation like the American Indians. He dies while ice skating outside his makeshift headquarters, shot to death by police suppressing the riots. His surname is a clear play on the notion of Darwinian "survival of the fittest" in which it is implied the strong prey on the weak to improve their odds of personal survival.

Eugene Jr.

Eugene has one son by way of his marriage with Margaret, Eugene Jr. Eugene Jr. probably has inherited the family's mental disorder, but because he has disavowed any contact with Eugene Sr., even his father isn't sure whether or not his son is stable or not.

Melanie

Melanie is Eugene's and Margaret's only daughter. She too despises Eugene and avoids contact with him. She is heavy and has a bulbous nose. She lives in Paris with her female lover.

Mildred

Mildred is Eugene's mother-in-law. For all practical purposes, she is a doppelganger, or mirror-image, of Margaret. Both are nearly catatonic when they are around Eugene. Both are reclusive. In fact, Mildred largely acts as a visual echo of Margaret, suggesting the line of hereditary insanity is long and tragic in their family's tree.

Jason Wilder

Jason Wilder is a media star who specializes in making right-wing statements to a largely pro-Wilder base of ravenous, loud and frequently vulgar fans. He feels it incumbent upon himself to proclaim himself America's moral guardian, even as he invests in dubious enterprises designed to exploit his followers out of their monies at every turn. He is emblematic of the kind of public figure Eugene dislikes intensely and so plays largely as a caricature, with larger-than-life mannerisms and flowery rhetoric on behalf of his own, selfish causes. He is behind the firing of Eugene because Wilder believes liberals and intellectuals like Eugene should be driven out of the academic

fields so that capitalists like himself can select the educational courses for students, instead.

Kimberley Wilder

Kimberley Wilder is Jason Wilder's daugher. She attends Tarkington College and agrees to wear an audio recording device so that Jason Wilder can gather evidence of Eugene's "radical" nature. Kimberley does as told, baiting Eugene with highly charged questions which force him to give honest if controversial answers. Later, the audio recordings will be edited in such a way that damns Eugene with distortions. Kimberley is mentally slow and is presented as a willing slave to her father's demands, apparently unaware she is being used by him for political gain.

Zuzu Johnson

Zuzu Johnson is the wife of the college's president Tex and is having an affair with Eugene that is secretive. Later when Jason Wilder confronts Eugene with photographic evidence of his nights with Zuzu, Eugene is forced to quit in order to save further embarrassment.

Pamela Ford Hall

Pamela Ford Hall is a conceptual artist in residence who teaches at Tarkington College. She is single and attracted to Eugene, so they begin having an affair. When Eugene first knocks on her door to introduce himself as a potential lover, Pamela asks him, "What took you so long?" Her art sculptures made of foam will be shown in a trendy New York City gallery only to be destroyed in a freak accident even as the media are rolling video cameras. Her name and career become equated with disaster in the public's eye as a result.

Tex Johnson

Tex Johnson is the president of Tarkington College. He is an unhappy man. His marriage to Zuzu is a joke. She has an affair with Eugene. Tex does not discover the affair until presented damning photographic evidence of Zuzu and Eugene at the termination hearing for Eugene.

Ed Bergeron

Ed Bergeron is a liberal professor at Tarkington College who challenges the right wing columnist Jason Wilder when Jason Wilder takes on intellectuals and compares them to traitors. Bergeron is a secret idol to Eugene because unlike most intellectuals, Bergeron is not afraid to write an editorial letter or two rebutting Wilder's often inaccurate and

misleading statements. Alas, Bergeron leaves the college and buys into a business that is later exposed as having sold toxic floor tiles to unknowing customers. Though the fault lies with owners previous to Bergeron, his career ends on a sad note of personal and professional failure.

Arthur K. Clarke

Arthur K. Clarke is a magazine publishing magnate who is given an honorary degree by the Board of Trustees at Tarkington College in exchange for Clarke making a large cash donation to the university. Eugene dislikes the fanfare and sense of entitlement the wealthy brings to the campus.

Elders of Trafalmadore

The Elders of Trafalmadore are fictional characters in a science fiction short story within the larger novel Hocus Pocus. Eugene believes this short story truly captures the insane way in which human beings act as if they were alien to one another instead of the same species sharing the same planet. The Elders are not suggested by Eugene to be real, but a metaphorical realization of the plight of mankind because of its own self-limiting viewpoints.

Lyle Hooper

Lyle Hooper is a so-called Townie who runs the notorious Black Cat Cafe. The Black Cat Cafe is a legitimate bar and lounge, but everyone in town knows Hooper also runs prostitutes out of the parking lot who service clients in their cars. Hooper is afforded a hypocritical respect in the small town because he runs the hooker business so quietly, no one can cite anything worthy of objection. Still, Hooper feels guilty for his dual standard and equally feels anger at society for forcing him to adapt to their need for an excuse for his activities, not his own need. He denies being a pimp until his dying moments, at which point he breaks down and admits he was a pimp all along.

Hiroshi Matsumoto

Hiroshi Matsumoto is the warden of the Japanese-owned Athena Prison. Hiroshi was a child of Hiroshima when the Americans bombed it with the world's first ever atomic bomb. He was a survivor and wandered the streets of his former city, seeing the horrors of the radiation and destruction first-hand. As warden of the prison, Hiroshi feels empathy for the black prisoners, believing as does Eugene they are being discriminated against by his fellow Japanese bosses. But like Eugene, he follows orders and does what he is told. Hiroshi is almost killed during the prison riots. He escapes but frost bite costs him toes and fingers. Later he kills himself.

Harvey Wheelock III

Harvey Wheelock III is a lifelong man of action who helps take control of the prison riot at Athena. A wealthy white outsider whose role is happenstance, Harvey nevertheless deputizes Eugene, forcing Eugene back onto the side of law and order after Eugene has earlier been deputized by Alton Darwin the leader of the riots to be on the Freedom Fighters' side. Harvey never questions the right or wrong of his decisions, which makes him dangerous, according to Eugene.

Objects/Places

Scipio

Scipio is the small town that houses both the university and the prison. Scipio is the setting for much of the story.

Vietnam

Vietnam is a country that was once at war in the 1960s and 1970s with American and communist countries using Vietnam as a proxy for their respective political goals. The Vietnam War was very unpopular in the U.S. Eugene serves in Vietnam and comes to dislike his country's foreign policy because of the terrible evils he sees committed in Vietnam.

Tarkington College

Tarkington College is the small university for educationally-challenged students. It was founded to help especially students who have dyslexia. It is located in Scipio, across the lake from Athena Prison.

Athena Prison

Athena Prison is the all-black inmate prison located across the lake from Tarkington College. It is managed by an outside company of private Japanese investors.

Mohiga Valley

The Mohiga Valley is the name for the large expanse of lands that make up Scipio, the college and the prison, as well as the lake and the surrounding countryside. It is the birthplace for much of the action that occurs throughout Hocus Pocus.

Indiana

Indiana is the home state of Eugene and where he spent his first 2 years. Indiana has a long history of producing progressives, or those who lean liberal in most political debates. Eugene is named after one of Indiana's most famous progressive political leaders who ran and lost for president of the United States.

Midland City, Ohio

Midland City, Ohio, is the small town Eugene and his family move to when he is 2 years old. It is a classically "All American" town that values hard work and conservative politics. The town is practically purchased by DuPont Industries when DuPont purchases Barrytron, Eugene's father's company.

Barrytron

Barrytron is the name of the family-held electronics company that is purchased by DuPont. The company is quickly dismantled of many employees, which causes a stress within Eugene's family since his father is employed there.

Ohio Science Fair

The Ohio Science Fair is where Eugene and Father reveal their collaboration on Eugene's science project, which is against the rules. Eugene is disqualified and views his father with shame as a result. This place alters Eugene's worldview at an early age, in that he sees he can be manipulated by others under the guise of authority without even realizing it.

West Point

West Point is a military academy where America's best soldiers are taught to become officers. Eugene winds up going to West Point after Sam Wakefield convinces him to go there. West Point dehumanizes Eugene and begins his descent into personal unhappiness.

Pavillion

The Pavillion is a student gathering spot at Tarkington College where students can unwind, chat and study in a group setting.

Samoza Hall

Samoza Hall is a great meeting room at the college. It is also where Jason Wilder stages his firing of Eugene while the Board of Trustees watches in horror.

Quadrangle

The Quadrangle is an open area where several buildings converge on the campus. Students gather there to socialize.

G.R.I.O.T.

G.R.I.O.T. is a popular computer program available for free play at the Pavillion. Once the user enters certain information, G.R.I.O.T. predicts the outcome of the user's life dependent upon their age, background, racial status, and other factors. Most times, G.R.I.O.T. predicts a sad outcome for the participant, unless they are from a wealthy background.

Trafalmadore

Trafalmadore is a fictional planet of beings who are featured in a science fiction short story Eugene reads called "The Protocols of the Elders of Trafalmadore." They are non-incorporated beings, literally invisible to the human eye.

Themes

Fate

Above all other themes, Vonnegut as writer is fascinated by the theme of Fate, and how it plays its invisible but heavy hand in the affairs of mankind. Throughout Hocus Pocus, Eugene constantly shifts back and forth in his life's story, always looking for the common thread that unites the many different experiences and feelings he has had. The only unifying or underlying sense he can gleam from his rumination is that Fate is behind much of what has happened to him, and that because he cannot alter it, he has basically been a powerless pawn in many aspects even in his own life's choices.

Vonnegut wants the reader to feel this unease and perhaps reflect back on the reader's own life, as well. How often has the reader wondered how different life might have turned out because of a missed airplane that later crashed, Vonnegut seems to ask. Eugene does this as well, recalling that because he ran into Sam Wakefield at two different and crucially important junctures in his life, Wakefield guided Eugene into making poor choices that he later regretted. In other words, at points in his life where Eugene has felt powerless to make informed decisions for himself, others have stepped in and made poor ones on his behalf. Eugene resents this constant meddling by Fate into his affairs, but is resigned to the fact there is nothing he can do except perhaps to have made some better personal choices along the way.

It is interesting that Fate is so omnipotent in Hocus Pocus, because Eugene goes to great lengths to prove he is not a religious believer while he tells his story to the reader. And yet, Eugene assigns cosmic meaning to the universe via believing in Fate, which is a form of religious belief, however much Eugene fails to grasp this contradiction about himself. Eugene is a man of science at heart, but maintains a superstitious hope against rationality that such forces as Fate and Destiny are actually at work in the world. It is this tension which Vonnegut is interested in exposing to the reader and why Fate is chosen thematically as a vehicle to examine it.

Honesty

Honesty is another major theme that Vonnegut plays with in Hocus Pocus. Eugene's first big exposure to the world beyond his childhood occurs when his father unceremoniously takes over Eugene's science experiment and proceeds to make it an impossibly complicated if spectacular presentation. This results in his father and Eugene being discovered as cheaters by the fair judges. Because Eugene is humiliated at what has occurred at the state level, no less, he is open to listening to Sam Wakefield moments later when Wakefield convinces the young man that the military is the place to be in life. Eugene agrees not because he thinks it is a good idea, but because in the spur of the moment, he sees a way out of his Ohio small town and most importantly away from his domineering father.

The theme of Honesty continues into the Vietnam War remembrances by Eugene. Eugene is haunted by the fact he was forced to not only kill civilians in warfare, but later lie about it as part of his propaganda job for the military as a public relations officer. Eugene believes that had his own government been honest about its motives for fighting Vietnam, which had more to do with profits for arms manufacturers than the stated lofty ideals, that his fellow countrymen would have ended the conflict sooner. Eugene cannot believe that so much effort, finally, is put into human lying when it could be re-directed into more productive means of social justice.

Honesty as a theme works throughout even the smallest sub-plots in Hocus Pocus. The characters who best exemplify what Eugene would call admirable in nature are also those who most cherish and live by being honest, both with themselves and others. Eugene knows that for all his good will and ability to help others, he basically lacks enough personal honesty to ever confront others who are egregiously self-righteous when dealing with anyone who does not agree. Eugene feels this moral shortcoming is one of the reasons he has failed in his life because he would not take a stand, even when it was clearly in his best interests long-term to do so.

Betrayal

Betrayal is at the heart of Hocus Pocus. Betrayal in the form of broken promises made and not kept by one's family, one's government, one's society and finally, the larger world of humanity, as well. Betrayal is the central theme that causes so much of Eugene's life to unfold that he cannot imagine a world where folks do not routinely lie, cheat and steal from one another. So much so, in fact, Eugene often indulges in such self-betrayals as well. For example, he cheats on his mentally ill wife, even though he knows to do so is technically wrong. Eugene tells himself it is okay since he and his wife can no longer make love, but he fails to appreciate his wife's needs are being abandoned by his actions, however much she cannot express this to him.

Another form of Betrayal as theme comes when Eugene joins the army and winds up becoming a mass murderer in the name of his country. Eugene enters the military with the hope of doing great things for his beloved homeland. Instead, he winds up committing atrocities and being expected to lie before the whirring film cameras and scribbling reporters at staged press conferences wherein he denies all such activities. The hypocrisy is too much for Eugene to bear, and he breaks from any belief in the overall decency of his country as a result.

Ironically, the final form of Betrayal comes from Eugene himself and is committed against himself. For Eugene finally allows himself to become the pawn in life and one that is all too often used by those with evil intentions. By the time he is switching allegiances from the rioting prisoners to the military forces restoring order at the book's climax, in essence, Eugene has already "sold himself out" to the point there is not much left to disgrace. Eugene cannot hide from this realization and stoically accepts that life for him has been informed and influenced largely by acts of human Betrayal.

Style

Point of View

The Point of View utilized is that of Eugene's and his exclusively. In this sense, it is First Person and narrated like a story told to one by a friend over dinner. In fact, Eugene is very conversational in his manner of telling the story, and very adept at recalling specific bits of conversation or scenery that give the reader a very vivid mental picture. Eugene is apparently an honest narrator, in that the story's events do not conflict with his telling of them. Often in a work of literature, the narrator will not be aware of certain ironies or exclusions he is not privileged to share, even though the reader may have such information. This can make the narrator unreliable. But Eugene is much more self-aware than many narrators, which creates a feeling of his being trustworthy to the reader. Eugene does this by not omitting his own terrible flaws as a human. This goes a long ways towards making the reader feel that if Eugene is willing to be so candid, he must not be hiding much. One note of caution should be noted, however. The opening is written by an anonymous author who tells us he or she has reconstructed the story from bits of scrap paper found in Eugene's room after his death. In other words, even though the bulk of the story is told from the First Person by Eugene, another unidentified First Person writer precedes Eugene's First Person narrative. In other words, because Eugene's words have been edited, however faithfully, the reader must assume they could have been misinterpreted.

Setting

The settings are very important to Vonnegut, particularly the construction of his mythic town of Scipio, where most of the action takes place. In Scipio, which is in a tiny upstate New York farming community called the Mohiga Valley, the writer builds two worlds that co-exist and yet never seem to take account of one another's existence. The prison is on one side of the lake and the university is on the other. The two face one another, and yet have no interaction, day to day, that is significant. This is Vonnegut's careful literary construction to represent the classic "Haves" or townies versus the "Have Nots" or the prisoners. By showing how clearly America allows such societal hypocrisy to flourish in broad daylight with only a shallow body of water dividing the two worlds, the writer is craftily demonstrating just how easily we as humans allow our worlds to be designed in manners that are not befitting our own best interests as supposedly free individuals. In this example, the lake is a neutrally-shared resource for both the poor and the wealthy, but the wealthy refuse to even acknowledge that the poor exist, let alone must suffer more than the wealthy just to exist alongside their better-suited brothers and sisters.

Language and Meaning

Vonnegut is very specifically an American writer. That is, he uses much local color in speech and often exaggerates characters to bring out their underlying stereotypical natures. Jason Wilder, the blowhard commentator, is a good example of how Vonnegut uses Language to convey a character's inner state of cunning. Wilder is eloquent and articulate, but just as clearly, selfish and judgmental. He uses flowery speech and even insists on quoting a long, dreary Shakespeare soliloquy into the hearing record as his parting statement. Wilder's vanity and ego are shown by the writer to be narcissistic and destructive not by actions alone, but the Language the author has Wilder utilize. Meaning is drawn from the way in which Vonnegut juxtaposes such overly sincere statements of nobility and high character by cretins like WIlder and their subsequent actions and intents, which in this case is to expose Wilder as a shameless self-promoter only concerned with making money.

Structure

Hocus Pocus is much like Slaughterhouse Five and other, earlier Vonnegut classics. Vonnegut never believed in linear storytelling, or rather, his best works did not follow this classical approach. Rather, he believed in shifting through a story rather like the way a child might a story book that is filled with pictures. That is, the child might flip through the book in its entirety to first see the illustrations and get a sense of the plot before then flipping back to the beginning of the book and actually reading it. Vonnegut's style is very childlike in this regard. He has Eugene explain a significant part of the story as if it meant not much at all, only to re-examine the same story later with a different perspective that offers a deeper insight. Vonnegut constantly bounces from one era to another, from one character to another, and even into science fiction stories that run parallel to Eugene's own story. That he can do this so fluidly that the reader not only wants to read along but gain further understanding is a testament to Vonnegut's innate storytelling abilities. Though it can feel haphazard, Vonnegut admitted in interviews he often spent great sums of time constructing these elaborately shifting Structures so that he could later trust the narrative would still make sense when he came to the point where he typed "The End."

Quotes

"If all had gone the way a lot of people thought it would, Jesus Christ would have been among us again, and the American flag would have been planted on Venus and Mars. No such luck!"
Chapter 1, Page 13

"One boy of only 18 said to me while he was dying and I was holding him in my arms, 'Dirty joke, dirty joke.'"
Chapter 2, Page 22

"And almost every book written for or about the ruling class."
Chapter 3, Page 31

"I learned to lie like that in high school."
Chapter 4, Page 36

"What's the hurry, son?"
Chapter 6, Page 50

"Too bad you were born. Nobody has any use for you."
Chapter 8, Page 68

"They could feast their eyes on whatever they liked, just so long as it was not relevant."
Chapter 9, Page 70

"All I ever wanted to overthrow were ignorance and self-serving fantasies."
Chapter 11, Page 92

"Who could blame the educated classes with political connections for staying home?"
Chapter 14, Page 117

"We could have saved it, but we were too doggone cheap."
Chapter 17, Page 140

"It was a racist conclusion, based on the belief that Black people couldn't mastermind anything. I will say so in court."
Chapter 19, Page 148

"It must have been politics."
Chapter 23, Page 168

"The people down here just ate that up!"
Chapter 26, Page 191

"Okay, I admit it. It really was a whorehouse."
Chapter 28, Page 206

Topics for Discussion

Do you think Eugene has led a good life in terms of his moral choices? If so, how does one justify the extremes of good and evil housed within one protagonist who is still moral such as Eugene? If not, why do you think as reader one can still feel empathy for Eugene?

Why do you think Vonnegut as author chooses to satirize an infamous tract such as "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" when it could be controversial? Many Jewish people rightfully consider the tract offensive, and yet Vonnegut's book has never received any criticism on its being anti-Semitic. How does the author use something that was once hurtful and transform it into something that makes a literary statement of merit?

Hocus Pocus has often been noted for its use of drawings by the author and use of numbers rather than phonetic spellings of numbers. The drawings are much like James Thurber, who used crude illustrations to make a visual point. What do you think of the author using such drawings to augment his text? Likewise, what do you think of Vonnegut's use of writing "1" for "one" instead of the normal literary conceit?

The narrative time-shifts constantly throughout Eugene's life, often without explanation for the shift. Does this plot construction device involve you as a reader, or temporarily break your reading spell and take you out of the action? If the latter, why do you think the writer utilizes it as a device?

Vonnegut does not shy away from using hateful names and racial slurs. While many will find such language inappropriately insensitive, Hocus Pocus has been noted to universal praise for its creative use of language and evocative style. What does it tell the reader that a writer can use such normally hateful words and insulting stereotypes and turn them upside-down to reveal new meanings? Does this imply the original language of hate speech may be equally coded with hidden meanings as well?

Eugene refuses to tell the reader how many people in total he has killed in combat. He tantalizes and teases that he will do so, but ultimately, Eugene only leaves a clue in the form of a puzzle that must be solved in order for the reader to gain the number of humans Eugene murdered. In essence, the question Eugene poses can only be solved by a handful of extra diligent readers who are willing to go the extra step of deductively reasoning the answer based on the clues. Why does Vonnegut want the reader to face this choice, and did you solve the puzzle or leave it unsolved? Why or why not?

The author tells us that the story we are about to read was assembled in the best narrative order possible because it was not originally written on a series of consecutive pages, but on scraps of found paper, each usually only an inch or so in size. In essence, the fictional "overseer" author informs us what follows is Eugene's authentic narrative, but in actuality, how does the reader know this to be true, especially if the person rewriting the text of what Eugene originally wrote is unknown? Are there parallels herein

to religious texts, government documents, and related writings that can be once-removed or more from the original sources?