A Man Without a Country Study Guide

A Man Without a Country by Kurt Vonnegut

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

A Man Without a Country by Kurt Vonnegut is a collection of non-fiction essays reflecting on humor, politics, religion, education, prejudice, ignorance, the environment, art, war, and more. He tackles all of these issues in the twelve chapters/essays that compose this book, using a customary wit that has made him internationally famous.

While this novel is autobiographical, it is not a life story in the way that so many other autobiographies are, and therefore lacks a conventional plot line. Each chapter in this work can stand alone as an essay, though the common themes or overriding threads that tie the chapters together are the ideas that Vonnegut is trying to put forth. One of the key ideas Kurt Vonnegut discusses, and then reiterates, throughout the entire work is that humor is a natural defense mechanism to deal with all the horrible things in the world we live in. While defying the natural plot would be common for most works, there is still a sense of movement.

Vonnegut's first essay discusses his life as a soldier, young, just a kid, and the experience of taking cover, listening to the bombs hit overhead. The beginning thus suggests youth, and as the essays move on there is a sense of aging, even though Vonnegut loves to jump back and forth chronologically, sometimes by decades in the same chapter. Questions are posed concerning war, politics, and humanity, in general. Vonnegut is very quick to compare his experiences fighting in World War II, generally considered the epitome of the definition of a moral war. He also says that the United States' war in Iraq is nothing like World War II. Vonnegut's experiences as a soldier gives him credibility on these matters, as he also spirals off into discussions on religion, the teachings of Jesus, the environment and horrible things that humanity does to it.

The plot is an evolving, overriding series of arguments. Discussions include everything from why oil is the worst addiction possible, to the need to just be kind to other people above all else. Vonnegut covers every topic, every angle, and he refuses to look at them just once. In a way, the book is like living life, and watching in your mind old memories as they come and go, even as you march forward in what is the here and the now. In the end, the plot of this book is Kurt Vonnegut's search for a solution, a country, an identity, or even a hope of any kind. It is in that walk, that very reflection of life itself, that this book takes its arc, and Vonnegut provides at least one more gift for his readers, as good as any before it.

Chapter 1, "As a Kid I was the Youngest"

Chapter 1, "As a Kid I was the Youngest" Summary

In the first essay, Vonnegut begins this book by discussing humor, its importance in his life, and its importance to the world in general. At first, he describes his youth. As the youngest child in a family of intellectual talkers, he always wanted to jump into the conversation, but even as a child he knows the rest of the family (his father, mother, older brother, older/sister) are not interested in his childish days.

One day he makes a joke, and everyone stops to pay attention. This begins Kurt Vonnegut's days as a joker, since telling a joke allows him to break into a conversation. As a child, he saw this as the only way to break into an adult conversation, and so he fell in love with humor and jokes.

Vonnegut came to an interesting conclusion: that tragedy, or the fear of tragedy, was for some reason often the most funny. Suffering often times leads to the need for humor, and for better humor. Vonnegut points out that he grew up during The Great Depression - a time that had wonderful comedy, because the world needed it. He mentions Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy as some of the finest examples. In his opinion, the reason Laurel & Hardy were so funny was because they were too innocent for a cruel world, and always seemed in danger of dying as a result.

After this declaration, Kurt Vonnegut makes sure to add his little version of an asterisk, in nothing that there is humor, and there is bad taste. He comments on never being able to crack any kind of a joke about the Holocaust or the assassinations of President Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr. He also re-emphasizes that anything else is open game.

The end of this section concludes with Vonnegut reminiscing about the city of Dresden, when it was being bombed in World War II. He was an American POW.Another soldier, mimicking a haughty, aristocratic lady's voice said, "I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight," in the middle of the firebombing. Vonnegut reflects that nobody laughed, but everyone was glad he said it, because it proved they were all alive.

Chapter 1, "As a Kid I was the Youngest" Analysis

In this essay, Vonnegut focuses on how important humor is, and why it is such a major part of his life. Though brief, he jumps around wildly from his early youth, to his experiences as a soldier in World War II, to later times as an established writer. Through out his wild jumping through his life's timeline, the theme is always about humor, its attachment to tragedy or potential tragedy, and the need for comedy, especially in the worst of times. This allows us a view into Vonnegut's personality, into a characteristic that has helped make him a world famous author. It demonstrates just how important that humor is to him as a core part of who he is.

Chapter 2, "Do You Know What A Twerp Is?"

Chapter 2, "Do You Know What A Twerp Is?" Summary

This section is basically split into four sections by blue asterisks. In traditional Vonnegut style, the prose is quick and the action shifts quickly. The first section is a conglomeration of thoughts and ideas, with a seemingly new one almost every paragraph. First, Vonnegut makes the statement that he considers anyone unworthy, who hasn't read "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce (in Vonnegut's opinion, the greatest American short story) or "Democracy in America," by Alexis de Tocqueville.

Vonnegut lists a couple paragraphs more of examples, before wrapping up his lists by pointing out how every single great piece of literature was about how much of a bummer it is to be a human being. He follows this with a paragraph on how evolution can go to hell, followed by a paragraph defending humanity in the sense that everything is always new to those of us who are born. He says that the world is so crazy, that even if we weren't screwed up coming into the world, the world is enough to screw us up once we get here. This rationale is followed by a one paragraph rant on the need to get rid of petroleum.

The second section is about Socialism and Socialists. Vonnegut makes a stirring defense of moderated Socialism, pointing out the Americans who permanently improved standards for the common working man. He makes some interesting comparisons between Socialism and Christianity. He devises a rather convincing argument that Marx did not condemn religion, and that to have Joseph Stalin and Chinese dictators represent Socialism is like having the Spanish Inquisition representing Christianity. The section ends with a Socialist on trial, Harvard educated, who when asked by a judge how he could possibly live the lifestyle he chose responded, "The Sermon on the Mount."

The third section is Vonnegut's first mention of the importance of art. This section leads to a hint of bitterness about being labeled a science fiction writer, and wondering why that should disqualify him from being taken seriously. This is also followed with the observations that most critics come from English departments and tend to teach a basic fear of science and technology that Vonnegut doesn't believe should be there.

The fourth and final section of this chapter is by far and away the longest. Vonnegut talks about his experiences as an American prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany, and the night the British firebombed the city, killing 135,000 civilians in one night. Vonnegut calls it the worst massacre in European history, and reflects on how amazed he was the German soldiers didn't shoot every single one of them the next day. These are the experiences that led to the writing of "Slaughterhouse Five," perhaps Vonnegut's most

famous work. He discusses his earliest attempts to write the novel, and how they all failed abysmally, until he realized he could tell the truth. He didn't have to be a hero or a moral superman, but just had to write the work as it was supposed to be written.

Chapter 2, "Do You Know What A Twerp Is?" Analysis

The second chapter is a little more confusing than the first. However, in the end, the most overarching theme is the connection between great literature and the misery of the human experience. It was from this misery and his most traumatizing memories that Vonnegut's finest work arguably emerged. Vonnegut also makes a point that this misery that is present in all the great works of literature, from Russian to European, to religious scriptures, is the common thread from which people across all cultures can relate to one another. Even in his early humorous rants in this chapter, the basic theme is that we are people, people are completely screwed up, and we're screwing up the world. It's a bummer to be a person, but, hey, at least we get great art out of the deal!

Chapter 3, "Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing"

Chapter 3, "Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing" Summary

Vonnegut begins this chapter in his conventional humorous form, giving good advice on why one should never use semi-colons in writing. He calls them, "transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing." This is the first simple lesson before a sidebar of advice describing going into arts as the perfect way to disappoint your parents. After a humorous paragraph on this matter, which also describes why it is a good idea to go into the arts anyway, he continues to describe a more structured possible study of literature.

Vonnegut introduces the idea of bell curves from his science degrees. By using bell curves, he describes some of the most basic story-telling structures, the basic themes that make up all stories, and shows how they look on his graphs. The first describes the basic "boy meets girl" story line and shows a character that starts well, hits conflict and hard times, gets girl and lives happily ever after to for the stretched out "U" shape of a normal bell graph.

The next story type Vonnegut tests in his creative writing lesson is a little different, with the character starting in the dumps, rising up, falling back down, and then floating up in the end. Vonnegut shows this on his graph, too, before showing the Cinderella story concept and graphing both. As the pictures continue to become a little stranger each time, the reader gets the sense of Vonnegut setting the stage to make his main point, which is exactly what is in the process of happening.

The Cinderella graph looks strange enough, as it starts down, goes up in a way that literally looks like a flight of stairs, plummets straight down at midnight, but not as far down as before, and then shoots back up. Vonnegut adds a little physics sign for infinity, figuring the happily ever after ending went on forever. Then to throw everything off, Vonnegut describes the Kafka short story, "The Metamorphosis."

In Kafka's famous work, the main character starts out in the dumps, and then finds himself turning into a giant cockroach. To graph this, Kurt Vonnegut shows the line start at the unhappy part of the graph, dip straight down, and have an infinity sign. This makes for a grand total of one inch of graphed line before the infinity sign, and definitely throws a wrench into everything that came before it. Vonnegut's response to this is a simple and dry suggestion that Kafka writes depressing stuff.

Vonnegut chooses to use *Hamlet* to finish his creative writing lesson. The problems of this work that he illustrates to the reader all revolve around the fact that it is difficult to figure out what is good news and what is not. When the ghost of Hamlet's father

appears, we're not sure if it is good or bad news. When Hamlet dies at the end, we're not sure if he goes to heaven, hell, or neither. Ophelia kills herself, but now she will not see Hamlet become a murderer. Vonnegut shows a blank graph, because he does not, and cannot, ever know enough of what is going on in the plot to show an accurate line. Vonnegut says this means he has "proven" that Shakespeare is no better a storyteller than anyone else. However, he amends that notion to say that *Hamlet* is a masterpiece for the simple reason that it tells the truth.

Chapter 3, "Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing" Analysis

Kurt Vonnegut's lesson in creative writing proposes a few different points to consider. One point shows that, for certain stories and themes, the bell curve graphs are not such a bad idea. For beginning writers, this method could clear up some confusion and help tackle that first novel. At the same time, Vonnegut uses his own method to show how depressing works by Kafka are, yet in no way does Vonnegut cut Kafka's work down. Then Hamlet screws up everything, and he does this to show that even though Hamlet cannot be quantitatively measured, we still accept its greatness. By doing this, Vonnegut ends the chapter by both reaffirming and expanding upon his points from earlier chapters. He confirms that great literature is both about what a drag it is to be a human, and it is literature that tells the truth, which sometimes means that we don't know good from bad, right from wrong, a good turn from a bad, and that is okay, because that is life.

Chapter 4, "I'm Going to Tell You Some News"

Chapter 4, "I'm Going to Tell You Some News" Summary

This very short chapter starts with the announcement by Vonnegut that he has special news to announce. After confirming that he is not running for President, and he is not a closet pedophile, he seems to get serious in announcing he plans to sue the Pall Mall cigarette company, whose cigarettes he is addicted to and has been for most his life. The he reveals the reason for the lawsuit is that the cigarettes keep promising to kill him, yet here he is in his eighties.

Vonnegut transitions from his own addiction to others. The government has a war on drugs, which is better than no drugs at all. He also remembers the saying that Prohibition is better than no alcohol at all. He uses these observations on the most common addictions, and the hypocrisy on how the most harmful are completely legal, to make a natural transition into a topic he brings up in chapter one, which is petroleum.

Oil is the world's greatest addiction, and Vonnegut calls us all junkies, who are too far in to get out. He brings up the interesting question, so what happens when we have to go off cold turkey? He suspects it will not be pretty, that all of society that is left will be now permanently separated, and in the end, humanity made every decision as if there was no tomorrow, and now, he argues, there isn't.

Chapter 4, "I'm Going to Tell You Some News" Analysis

This chapter is a prime case in point of Vonnegut's earlier assessment that in the absolute worst of times humor becomes all the more important. The end theme of this short chapter is that the world's addiction to fossil fuels, the society built relying on them, and the damage they cause the Earth will result in the Earth being uninhabitable. Basically, in two hundred years time, we have managed to kill everyone. This is a huge, depressing overview of the situation, and yet this chapter is full of jokes, some light-hearted, some crude, all pretty funny. In a short amount of time, Vonnegut uses the prime examples of human addiction in tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and LSD to make the transition to oil. He says that the curtain is falling, and no one has done a damn thing to stop it.

Chapter 5, "Okay, Now Let's Have Some Fun"

Chapter 5, "Okay, Now Let's Have Some Fun" Summary

Vonnegut knows how to grab the reader's attention, and he proves it again in this short chapter by following the title line with the proposition to talk about sex. This doesn't last long, but the idea jumps almost immediately into family and extended family. Vonnegut says that women want many people to talk to, and men want a bunch of pals. A conventional family does not offer that, because it would contain one husband, one wife and some kids. The idea of an extended family is one that Vonnegut finds appealing. He says most Americans do not have one, unless you are a Kennedy. He adds that this is part of the reason why the divorce rate is so high.

In an extended family, women have many people to talk to, without wearing out their welcome, and men have a large group of pals already there. Vonnegut says this is a good thing, and uses an example of an Ibo who has an extended family of 250 people. His wife was pregnant, and as soon as the baby was born, they planned to visit every single relative so the child could get to know the family, and vice-versa. After talking about how beautiful this would be, Vonnegut takes the time to discuss his own roots, when German-American and Anglo were still considered two different groups. Early in the 1900s, when tens of thousands of immigrants were coming in, many were German, and many of them succeeded. This led to the question, "Whose country is this, anyway?" Vonnegut describes his people's immigration as almost a Trojan horse. They were expected to be cheap laborers and take jobs others did not want. Instead, many prospered, became businessmen and bosses, particularly in the Midwest.

Chapter 5, "Okay, Now Let's Have Some Fun" Analysis

This chapter, again a very short one, is pretty straightforward. It does not contain as many of the overriding themes or reflections found in earlier work. In a way this chapter hits home as strong personal reflection, a stream of consciousness that seems to hit the paper. Kurt Vonnegut focuses on older traditions in this chapter, on how passing time has affected him. His thoughts on extended families seem almost wistful and surprisingly straightforward, as compared to much of his humorous writing style. The reminiscing into older times, when the term "German-American" actually had a distinctive meaning, has pride and identity, but also a touch of things past. He points out that the once clear-cut line between German-American and Anglo became dimmer and thinner every day, and has now virtually disappeared. While most would count this as a good thing, it is interesting to note that Vonnegut's tone, while proud of the accomplishments of his immigrant ancestors, also seems a little dejected, as if the loss

of that specific identity also opens up the possibility of losing sight of those great accomplishments.

Chapter 6, "I Have Been Called a Luddite"

Chapter 6, "I Have Been Called a Luddite" Summary

Vonnegut begins this chapter with a description of what a Luddite is, and why he is proud to be one. A Luddite is a person who hates the advancement of technology, named after Ned Lud, who was a textile worker who smashed a machine that would put him out of a job and thus cause his family to starve. Vonnegut goes on to describe how he misses typewriters, and how it is impossible to find one anywhere anymore. He mentions the first typewritten novel as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, a mention that obviously brings strength to his point, and then continues to why computers bug him.

To show why he would prefer a typewriter, Vonnegut traces his steps through a normal morning that would occur after typing twenty or thirty pages of a new manuscript, and making the corrections and changes in pencil. He goes across the street to a local corner store, chats to the locals in line, and buys an envelope from the Hindus who own the store. He then seals the manuscript in the envelope. He describes the walk to a mailing station down by the United Nations, where there is a girl that he is in love with. Vonnegut mentions that the girl does not know this, but his wife does, but it is okay, because he will never act on it. He chats to the people in line, gets the correct postage, and sends of the manuscript.

At home, Vonnegut calls up Carol, a lady in New Jersey, who does all his typing for him. He chitchats for quite a while about bluebirds, recent developments, and anything else that comes up. To some people, this is the type of wasted day that computer technology could eliminate. However, Vonnegut argues that these small things in life are exactly what the point of life is, and to eliminate them makes no sense whatsoever. "How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you any different," says Vonnegut, which is the perfect summation to this entire chapter.

Chapter 6, "I Have Been Called a Luddite" Analysis

This chapter is interesting, because it is much more conventionally paced than many of the other chapters. As opposed to having four paragraphs about four rants, this chapter is a smooth transition that pretty much focuses on one timeline. The stance Vonnegut takes on technology is especially interesting, because it does not seem like he is against technology in and of itself, he is against it, because it robs people of the little joys and times to get away that they were meant to have. Early on in this chapter, his wife even asks him why he doesn't just buy a bunch of envelopes in bulk and stick them in the closet. Vonnegut huffs and the suggestion and otherwise does not mention a response, as he goes out to buy a single manila envelope.

A strong implication in this chapter is that Vonnegut despairs at what people are becoming. By allowing computers and technology to take over every aspect of life, the meaning, the purpose, the small joys, the very point and nature of man is being lost. The reason this chapter is an enjoyable read is, because it reminds the reader of all the small things in life, of the need to just occasionally get out of the house for the sake of getting out of the house. It is a tragedy to lose those moments, that understanding, and that is what Vonnegut mourns about the proliferation of technology.

Chapter 7, "I Turned Eighty-two on November 11"

Chapter 7, "I Turned Eighty-two on November 11" Summary

The first couple of paragraphs describe the problems of growing old, most noticeably how gravity is no longer a friend. This hardly remains the main topic of discussion, as Vonnegut quickly moves to a mention about war. Vonnegut lists the government, corporations, charities, and religious organizations as just some of the institutions that tend to get corrupt, greedy, and stupid, but at least they can't ruin the music. He reflects on how during the Vietnam War, as corruption, greed, and stupidity ran amuck, that the music continued to get better and better. Vonnegut describes music as the only evidence he ever needs that God exists, and explains how the blues were the root for every good music form that would eventually follow.

Vonnegut then discusses how every generation has the problem of being put in charge when they are still just babies, and the shock that comes when they see how much of a mess the entire world is. There is a brief sidebar about how anyone who follows science closely knows we're in trouble. This is followed by a detailed discussion of war, with a strong focus on the current American war in Iraq. Vonnegut discusses the poetics of Abraham Lincoln's famous quotes on the Civil War, especially in light of how he recognized that they could never make the ground of battle more sacred then the men who had already willingly given their lives for it.

In typical Vonnegut fashion, he also gives his comments on the current war without pulling a punch. He argues that America will never be the moral happy place it should be, and that leaders will always be corrupt. In fact, Vonnegut refers to leaders as, "power hungry chimpanzees" who are already absolutely corrupted. To show a historical proof of this, he points to the Mexican-American War, and the fact that Mexico never attacked the United States, and that Mexican soldiers were labeled as butchers just for defending their homes against American settlers who fought them, at first, without government permission. However, as Vonnegut points out, it did give the United States a lot of land that previously was not ours. It also allowed Polk to ride on the sacrifice of common people to advance himself into the Presidency.

Vonnegut makes a strong statement about how he is not sure that he can be funny, anymore, because of all the depressing things he sees. Then, he says that the reason George W. Bush is so angry with Arabs is because they invented algebra. Obviously, there is still some spark left.

Chapter 7, "I Turned Eighty-two on November 11" Analysis

The beginning of the chapter is used to describe Vonnegut's age to give him the knowledge and authority those eighty-two years of age has earned him. He also mentions his time as a World War II veteran. Since World War II is very much seen as the one virtually unchallengeable moral war, this also gives him the experience, as well as the age, to talk about war, politics, and all moral matters pertaining to both.

Much of this chapter is trying to see the positive aspect of the horrors of war and life. Vonnegut mentions that slave owners had a higher rate of suicide than the actual slaves. Part of this reason may have been because slaves had the earliest forms of blues music, which allowed them to vent. The atrocities of the Civil War are offset by some of the most beautiful poetry ever spoken. It was relayed by Abraham Lincoln. The honor and sacrifice of the soldiers brings intangible honor and glory to them, even as current leaders use and abuse them seemingly without a second thought.

Vonnegut is especially disturbed by this point. He points out that the troops seem to be used by modern presidents like toys given to spoiled rich boys on Christmas Day, to do whatever they want with them without a second thought. Vonnegut cites his gratefulness that he was never used in that manner, when he served the nation in World War II. He points out that this spoiled hypocritical attitude is furthered by the now constant suggestions that an American disagreeing with a President sending Americans off to die is seen as tantamount to disgracing the troops and hurting their morale. As Vonnegut points out, soldiers in war have a lot more to think about than what a few people at home think after watching television, and they have enough in their everyday lives to sap morale.

This chapter is very sobering, and shows the deep reflection Vonnegut goes through on these matters. His distaste of the current administration is obvious, though he tries to keep some sort of humor on it, which after all, is the best defense to tragedy.

Chapter 8, "Do You Know What a Humanist Is?"

Chapter 8, "Do You Know What a Humanist Is?" Summary

The beginning of this chapter answers the question in the title. A humanist is an individual who believes in justice, helping other people, and living honorably while not believing in an afterlife of any kind. Vonnegut explains that he is a humanist, as were his parents, his brother and his sister, and his grandparents. Kurt Vonnegut reveals that he is, in fact, the Honorary President of the American Humanist Association, having taken the place of Isaac Asimov after his death. Vonnegut discusses how it is a pointless position, but he spoke at a memorial for Asimov and opened with a line about Isaac being in heaven. The place laughed so hard, it took five minutes for him to move to the next line.

Not being one to shy away from controversy, Vonnegut follows this story with a question that asks what humanists think about Jesus. The point of view he gives is that, as long as the teachings were beautiful and admirable, it doesn't matter if Jesus is God. Kurt puts a further personal point in, saying that if it wasn't for the Sermon on the Mount, he would rather be born a rattlesnake than a human.

This essay goes on to discuss "thinkers" versus "guessers." To the credit of most people, Vonnegut says that most of us are guessers. We really do not know what is going on most of the time, therefore, we take stabs in the dark to see what happens. As a demonstration, he shows one good guesser, and one bad guesser, both of whom are among two of the most influential men in history. One is Aristotle. The other is Adolf Hitler. Obviously, it is easy to tell the good one from the bad one.

It bothers Vonnegut to observe that the loudest, most ignorant guessers are the only ones with the ability to get into office. Therefore, they are the ones who have all the power, all the destructive technology, and are making all the decisions. What is most baffling about this is all the people who completely ignore their education to follow outdated ideologies. Vonnegut weeps over the fact that Harvard and Yale educated people ignore everything they've learned and de-humanize millions of people because of race and religion, and millions of soldiers, because they are lower class.

Vonnegut gives a list at the end of the section that outlines the reasons people need to think. One is how Mark Twain and Albert Einstein both gave up on humanity at the end of their lives, something Vonnegut now proclaims, as well. He points out that while President Bush claims to be a Christian, so did Adolf Hitler.

The final section goes over the life of one of Vonnegut's heroes, Ignaz Semmelweis, who was a doctor who worked in Austria in the 1830s and believed that germs could

cause disease and washing hands would be enough to save the lives of birthing mothers. After a lot of pestering, the other doctors agreed, heaping sarcasm on him. Then, an amazing thing happened. Women stopped dying while giving birth. Instead of being thanked, the doctors with wounded pride drove Ignaz out of the country, despite the fact that the man literally saved thousands of lives. Near the end of his life, he took a dirty scalpel and pricked his hand, knowing the germs would kill him, which they did.

Chapter 8, "Do You Know What a Humanist Is?" Analysis

This chapter is a way of giving honest, and much needed, criticism to the highest echelons of government. While the American government is an obvious target for such criticism, Vonnegut makes it abundantly clear that this does not just apply to the United States, but to humanity, in general. The definition of a humanist implies people who not only try to live good lives without the benefit of an afterlife, but also who think. Vonnegut does not explicitly state this, nor does he suggest that non-Humanists do not think. Nonetheless, the theme is clear throughout this chapter.

The loudness of the ignorance is another theme throughout the entire chapter, and what is especially worrying about this is that the ignorant are the ones making all the decisions, and they seem to be going out of their way to ignore any education they actually have to continue. Vonnegut shows several examples of this, from America to Austria and everywhere else. Consider if men hailed as the greatest geniuses in their field, such as Albert Einstein and Mark Twain, have given up on humanity. What does that say about humanity? Think of a doctor, who saves thousands of lives in his day, much less the tens or even hundreds of thousands of lives saved based on his discovery. Shouldn't he be exalted? How about exiled and driven to suicide? Vonnegut wants us to look back, and while it is tempting to say that we are more enlightened, look at how the Florida election was blatantly rigged to keep black people from voting. Why were there no repercussions? Vonnegut believes that things never seem to change.

The end tone of this chapter is depressing, but the world is depressing and so it does fit. The final few paragraphs discuss how the ignorant in charge hate nothing more than a wise man or woman. The very end reads as part declaration, part advisement, and part prayer. Vonnegut pleads to live a life of honor anyway, to be wise anyway, and for the reader to save his or her own life, and to save everyone's. It is a huge, grand ending that is all the more stark because of the simple words used.

Chapter 9, "Do Unto Others"

Chapter 9, "Do Unto Others" Summary

This chapter is aptly named, since it begins with, and focuses on the old saying, "Do unto others would you would have them do unto you." Vonnegut starts by pointing out that while most people believe Jesus says this, and he does, that Confucius said it five hundred years before that. Vonnegut marvels at how while this is a common saying known in virtually every nation by hundreds of cultures, people still just do not get it. Vonnegut muses on how this is such a basic piece of advice that could change the world, and yet after over two thousand years nobody gets it.

Vonnegut uses the example of an early Socialist candidate for President of the United States, Eugene Debs, and how his political mottos and his philosophy of life and how similar it is to Jesus and the Beatitudes. He is very forward in pointing out that Jesus's teachings seem a long way from the policies of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfield, and company. He also mourns how the vocal Christians scream and cry about having the Ten Commandments in the classroom, but they stay by Bush and company, even when his policies and actions are blatantly against Jesus's teachings.

Vonnegut describes the current government as a few Yale C students who surrounded themselves with racists and what Vonnegut refers to as PP, or psychopathic personalities. He further says that what is alarming about all of this is that they will dive us into and endless war, defend CEO's who run their corporations into the ground and steal pensions, and none of them will bat an eye at doing it no matter who complains. To Vonnegut this is frightening, because it seems like everyone knows exactly what they are doing and exactly what the consequences are, but they simply do not care.

Part of this, Vonnegut points out, is that the system is designed to be appealing to loud nutcases. He says that, even in high school, only the obvious nutcases run for student body president, and the trend continues. The author continues by saying that if the America he loves still exists anywhere, it is the enemy of Washington DC, and its defenders are librarians, who have shredded and destroyed lists rather than hand over to the government the personal reading lists of all the Americans who want nothing more than to read some books.

Chapter 9, "Do Unto Others" Analysis

This particular chapter is very specifically aimed at the current situation in the United States, and even more so at the current United States government. It is easy to see that Vonnegut does not support the Bush administration in any way, shape or form. Vonnegut's general impression of politicians is not very positive. However, the author describes the Bush administration as a bunch of psychos, who are going to do whatever they want, because they can.

While Vonnegut does not make a direct appeal to Christians to follow the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatititudes, there is definitely an implied wish, or if not a wish, at the very least a wistfulness. When he compares the Ten Commandments of Moses to the teachings of Christ, and then to the policies of the current "Christian" administration, he demonstrates obvious differences between the three. Vonnegut strongly applauds the Sermon on the Mount, but condemns actions of the Bush administration that seem completely contrary to those Christian teachings.

This is the chapter where Vonnegut first uses the title of the book, describing himself as a man without a country. He reflects on the ideals he fought for in World War II, as close to a just and moral war as one can get, and on how the only ones who seem to hold the line are the librarians, who have stood against a modern United States government that would have been called Communist, or worst, in the 1950s.

Chapter 10, "A Sappy Woman from Ypsilanti"

Chapter 10, "A Sappy Woman from Ypsilanti" Summary

This entire chapter is about a series of letters Kurt Vonnegut receives from various individuals, and the responses he sent to each. The first letter is from a woman from Ypsilanti, but there are also five other letters, for six total, and responses that make up this section. These letters reflect themes from every other chapter, and bring to light Vonnegut's full personality with his interaction.

The first letter is from a 43-year-old woman from Ypsilanti who is pregnant with her first child. She sent a letter asking if she should really bring a life into such a world. Vonnegut's first reaction is to yell, "Don't do it!" He lists a whole paragraph of reasons why she should not, but then sends her a letter saying that the most worthwhile thing about being alive was the music, and never knowing when you would meet a saint. A saint, by his definition, is a person who behaves decently, which is enough to set them apart in Vonnegut's mind from an incredibly not decent society.

The second letter is actually not a letter, but a very brief conversation with a young man named Joe, from Pittsburgh. This section is only two very small paragraphs, where Joe says: "Please tell me it will all be okay." Vonnegut give a several sentence reply, the last of which is to say that in life he has to be kind.

The third letter is from a young unnamed man in Seattle. He writes about the annoying process of going through airport security where the security guards force him to take off his shoes to check for explosives. The author of the letter reflects on how ridiculous it is that one man tried to blow up an airplane with his shoes, and the young man from Seattle said it made him feel like he was living in some surreal world that not even Kurt Vonnegut could have imagined. Vonnegut replies that the whole thing is a giant practical joke. However, he goes on to mention Abbie Hoffman, who said publicly that the new high is to take a banana peel rectally, hoping that this will cause the FBI to shove banana peels up their backsides to find out if it was true.

The fourth letter came with no address. It was an extremely "right-wing" letter, citing that Iraq was our greatest threat, and connecting Saddam Hussein to the 9-11 attacks. Kurt's response, assumed in jest, was that, for the safety of everyone, we should get shotguns and start shooting up the neighborhood. That is, with the exception of cops, who possessed firearms.

The fifth letter is from a man from Little Deer Isle, Maine. He wanted to know why al-Qaeda was so angry. He wondered how they could hate our freedoms, when we are torturing their captives at Guantanamo, and how Bush gets away with everything. The

final question is whether there can be peace without truth. Vonnegut's basic response is that, when the Bush administration took over, somehow all the Constitutional safeguards, such as the House, Senate and Supreme Court, would be truly Christian.

The sixth and final letter is from a man in San Francisco, who first questions how America can be so stupid, then describes Bush as a moron puppet leading everybody off the edge. Vonnegut replies by telling the man that if he doubted that we are all demons in Hell, and then he should read Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* from 1898. This response also leads to the conclusion. Vonnegut points out that this story, which argues that Satan created Earth and humankind, came before World War I, which brought death and warfare to an unprecedented level.

Chapter 10, "A Sappy Woman from Ypsilanti" Analysis

The letter format is an interesting way to go, especially since a lot of it does not really open something new, but only reiterates what is already being said. Then again, using a letter format allows Vonnegut to show that he is not the only one who thinks the way that he does. It also gives a sort of interaction that can mimic an actual question answer response between the reader and the author. This is section may very well be there to reassure the author, since he is tackling so many difficult issues that he thinks should be easy for everyone to see and deal with. Yet, like so often in human history, we all seem to miss the point.

Chapter 11, "Now Then, I Have Some Good News"

Chapter 11, "Now Then, I Have Some Good News" Summary

This piece actually reads like a fictional Kurt Vonnegut novel, which is probably due in no small part to the fact that a large chunk of it is about an unfinished novel he is currently trying to write. Vonnegut's good news is actually a fictional stand up act from his novel's main character, who talks about Martians who pee gasoline and crap uranium, offering the world the power supplies it no longer has.

The working title of the novel is *If God Were Alive Today* and is, according to Vonnegut, a novel that simply does not want to cooperate to be completed. The main character is a stand up comic who keeps cracking jokes even as the remaining fossil fuels run out and a virtual type of doomsday comes on the world. Most of this chapter is composed of slices from this unfinished novel where the main character reflects on some of the same issues Vonnegut is trying to bring to the forefront now, except his main character is at the point where everything is crumbling.

The next section is one medium sized paragraph where Vonnegut describes our biggest mistake, aside from people, is time and the way we slice it up. He wonders if the Second World War actually caused the first. He says that kind of makes sense, otherwise everything else is just a tragic joke of a mess.

The last section is Vonnegut talking to his editor, sending an orange alert about an impending terrorist attack. When his editor asks what's going on, Kurt replies by saying that he will know more after George W. Bush's state of the union address. The rest of the chapter is a conversation between the author, and one of his made up characters, Kilgore Trout. The two argue back and forth, and the end is Vonnegut's statement that we could have saved the world from ourselves, but we were just too greedy and too lazy. The final illustration of the chapter is a tombstone that says, "Life is no way to treat an animal."

Chapter 11, "Now Then, I Have Some Good News" Analysis

The title of this chapter is extremely ironic, though also somewhat bitter considering the content of the rest of the chapter. While Vonnegut is a master of grim humor, and while he has also made a strong case for the correlation between truly good humor and the fear of death. Therefore, it seems very appropriate that Vonnegut's main character is a

stand-up comedian. What other type of a character would be more perfect to view the end of the world?

The good news is a bit line from this stand up comedian, which can translate to there really is not any good news. This is a thoroughly depressing outlook, and one that seems to be strongly prevalent throughout the entire chapter. This is hidden beneath the surface of the chapter, and suggests a strongly bitter undercurrent. Many of the authors and geniuses of history that Vonnegut admires followed similar routes. Albert Einstein and

Mark Twain are the two examples of men he looks up to the most, and both were geniuses ahead of their times who gave up on humanity, and both were bitterly depressed near the end of their lives. It seems quite natural, then, that Vonnegut would follow in those footsteps, and the undercurrent of this chapter very much suggests that he has done so.

There is an extended conversation on whether or not everyone has gone nuts. The style shifts slightly here, to give the writing a less concentrated, more disheveled, unbalanced look. To further this point, Vonnegut declares how he calls one of his friends, Kilgore Trout, who is a fictional character that Vonnegut himself has made up, and the two have an argument. Kilgore, the made up entity, seems more balanced and steady than Vonnegut himself does. The conversation between the two focuses on Vonnegut arguing strongly that the Earth is an insane asylum for the moon, and that there was no doubt about it. Kilgore is much more non-committal.

The very end of the chapter shifts from what can be construed as humorous, since Vonnegut is the master of making the reader laugh even when the tragedy or subject of the scene makes it extremely inappropriate, into something that feels like a simple, heat-broken, resignation. He talks about saying good-bye to his old friend, planet Earth, and wondering how we were all too greedy and stupid to save it when we had the chance. This remains focused on the serious issues that Vonnegut brings up, but without the humor, without the sarcasm or satire. In many ways, this chapter appears to be Vonnegut struggling with himself, with the world, at the end of a long life, and the final resignation that as hard as he has tried, he, like too many others before him, barely made a dent when trying to move the world.

Chapter 12, "I Used to be the Owner and Manager of an Automobile Dealership"

Chapter 12, "I Used to be the Owner and Manager of an Automobile Dealership" Summary

Vonnegut describes a time when he owned and ran a Saab car dealership. He believes that this has a direct correlation to the startling question of why he has never won a Nobel Prize for literature. In detail, he describes what kind of a car the Saab originally was, and how it was one of the worst cars ever made. It was small, had "suicide doors," and had an engine like a lawnmower, where both oil and gas had to be mixed every time it was filled up. If someone forgot to do that, the engine went up in flames. After a very short time, Vonnegut agreed that the Swedes made the best watches, but terrible cars. He claims that, as a result of his bashing of Swedish engineering, he destroyed any chance he actually had of winning a Nobel Prize.

The second section discusses how difficult it is to make jokes work. Vonnegut refers to a previous work, *Cat's Cradle* as a prime example. That work is known for its extremely short chapters. He says the reason is each chapter is a joke, and each joke took a full day to write and correct, until it actually worked. Tragedy, Vonnegut says, is easy and should work naturally, as long as all the proper elements are there. Humor is once again held up as the main way to holding off how horrible life really is, but sometimes too much happens and a person can no longer stave life off with humor. Mark Twain is once again brought up as an example. He lived so long he watched his wife, his best friends, his parents, and his daughters all die, and then the darkest most depressing works of his life were produced. Vonnegut wonders if he has lost his ability to joke, no longer has enough of a defense mechanism against life. This honest reflection ends with him saying, "All I really wanted to do was give people the relief of laughing. Humor can be a relief, like an aspirin tablet. If a hundred years from now people are still laughing, I'd certainly be pleased" (Chapter 12, p. 130).

This is followed by a brief section where Vonnegut denounces the myth that an individual has to survive some great calamity to become an adult. Vonnegut's uncle, Dan, patted Vonnegut on the back and told him he was a man after the Second World War. He was the uncle, who Vonnegut admits that he felt like killing on the spot. His Uncle Alex, who never went to war, who was an insurance salesman, and whose main complaint was that too many people don't even realize when they're happy, is the one Kurt remembers fondly. Vonnegut ends this section with an admonition to every young person the age of his kids and grandkids to notice when they are happy.

Vonnegut, who in this chapter returns to his tendency of making large jumps back and forth, talks about imagination, and the need to foster it, develop it. The boom in technology has over-refined the imagination, and that is a shame. At the end of this section, he intentionally breaks the first rule he gives in the creative writing lesson.

Vonnegut uses a semi-colon. He says he does this on purpose, to make the point that rules can only be taken so far, even the good ones.

The next section is about the wisest person that Vonnegut has ever met. This person is Saul Steinberg. Saul is dead now, but was a man whom Vonnegut thought extremely highly of. Vonnegut says he could ask Saul any question, and Saul would always take five or six seconds to think about it, then give a perfect answer. As examples, Vonnegut shows Saul's response to Picasso, who is God's way of showing what being rich really is, why Vonnegut feels different from other novelists, because they are two different types of artists reacting to two different influences, and why he is not gifted.

Chapter 12, "I Used to be the Owner and Manager of an Automobile Dealership" Analysis

Vonnegut makes a strange case here, since he give the details of what a Saab was, and of how he will never get a Nobel Prize, because he bashed Swedish engineering. This section is hilarious, and yet he follows it with an extremely somber reflection on whether or not he can joke anymore, whether or not he is still funny, or if life has just gone on too long and he is past the point where he can still use humor to defend himself against the horrors of life. This would seem to be two conflicting viewpoints, and yet, it does not read like another Vonnegut joke.

In some ways, this feels like a chapter that is put together specifically to act as a conclusion. The text flows smoothly, but in a more conventional way, often times without the same distinct stamp that Vonnegut's writing will have. The final chapter is stuffed with quotable lines, and Zen like wisdom. The final section about the wisest person Vonnegut has ever known really brings that home, and the final lines sum up what he feels, what many artists feel, or maybe don't even know, that the struggle against their own limitations is the beauty of art.

Characters

Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut is the author and narrator. In addition, since this book is autobiographical, he is the main character, as well. Kurt Vonnegut is one of the premiere American authors of all time, and truly a master of letters. Vonnegut reflects on the major issues of politics, economics, religion, education, ignorance, war, and everything else in between, often using his own life and experiences as a backdrop. This book is autobiographical in many ways, though more because of the philosophies, beliefs, and mind of Vonnegut, as opposed to actual physical history.

Kurt Vonnegut is considered one of the greatest authors, but the only allusion of any kind that suggests he thinks highly of his own skills is with the question of why he has not won a Nobel Prize. Even then, the question is framed in humor, and surrounded by jokes, so the reader gets the impression that he may not even care. Vonnegut has written over twenty novels through the years, and is widely recognized. His experiences in the book involve writing, being a POW in World War II at Dresden, coming back from the war, owning a car dealership, and everything in between. The book does not go chronologically, and so he jumps back and forth between various points in his life.

Carol Atkins

Carol Atkins is an older lady from Woodstock, New York, who did typing for Kurt Vonnegut back before computers, when all manuscripts needed to be typed, hand corrected, and then re-typed. Carol did the re-typing for Kurt. Vonnegut reflects on how they would chat on the phone, ask about each other's families, and whatever else happened since the last time they spoke. Carol is an example of a friend that Vonnegut made in his lifetime, because there was not the type of technology that the world has now. Carol helps to symbolize the good things that came from taking a little extra time to interact with people and write the old-fashioned way, and of the relationships and small blessings that never form when the new way is embraced.

Mark Twain

Mark Twain is the penname of Samuel Clemens, by far the most quoted and referred to individual in this book. Mark Twain is the forefather of all American literature, and one of the greatest authors who has ever lived. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as Vonnegut points out, was the first typewritten novel, and is mentioned in the book. Twain strikes a chord in Vonnegut, because Mark Twain was also a living legend and literary figure. He was an individual, who used humor as a self-defense mechanism to fend off the world, and who later discovered that it was not so easy to do as it was in youth. In essence, he became darker and more depressed at watching mankind's foolishness repeat itself over and over again.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is a former President of the United States and mentioned by Vonnegut on several occasions through out the book. The author obviously respects Lincoln, and often quotes the legendary commander in chief, who was President during the American Civil War. Lincoln's condemnation of James Polk and his war against Mexico, as well as the poetic description of the soldiers' sacrifice at the battle of Antietam, shows a character of extreme depth, one whom it is easy to see that Vonnegut thinks very highly of.

George W. Bush

George W. Bush was the current President of the United States, at the time this book was written. Vonnegut has very little good to say about him, his Cabinet, or the job that he is doing. Like many of the "characters" in this book, he is almost a caricature of himself, as Vonnegut sees him. While the author things extremely highly of Lincoln as a poet, and highly Einstein as a great mind, he thinks very little of Bush. Most of Vonnegut's complaints are lodged in how the President appears venomously anti-science, thinks of himself as infallible, and treats soldiers like a rich kid treats Christmas toys, something that, as a World War II vet, especially angers Vonnegut.

Powers Hapgood

Powers Hapgood is one of the characters in the book that Vonnegut professes to actually know personally. Powers Hapgood is an idealistic socialist who comes from a middle class family in Indiana. He graduated from Harvard, but chose to work as a coal miner and led several protests. He inherited the family cannery, gave it to the workers who then ruined it, after which he became an active member of the CIO union. He is used as an example of why Socialism is not anti-religious, since at a trial when a judge questioned him about how he could live that kind of a life, Powers' response was, "The Sermon on the Mount."

Bernie O'Hare

Bernie O'Hare is an old war buddy of Vonnegut's. Both of them were World War II veterans, and both were captured and labored as American POWs in Dresden. When Kurt was first trying to write *Slaughterhouse-Five* he was trying to drum up old war stories with his friend, see what the two of them could remember, and try to figure out why the book kept coming out like crap. Actually, Bernie's wife gives Kurt the answer that he is searching for.

Mary O'Hare

Mary is the wife of Bernie O'Hare, Kurt Vonnegut's war buddy and fellow POW. She listens to Bernie and Kurt talking about the war and the prison camp, swapping stories, and finally yells at them, saying they were just babies themselves and not John Wayne superheroes. Vonnegut says this realization, that he could actually tell the truth, is what allowed him to really look at the manuscript and turn it into the masterpiece it would become.

Ignaz Semmmelweis

Ignaz Semmmelweis is a Hungarian doctor, who practiced medicine in Austria in the 1840s. Ignaz was one of the first doctors to theorize that germs caused sickness and death. He was a doctor of pregnant mothers, and was repulsed at how many mothers died giving birth. He begged his colleagues to wash their hands, was ridiculed and mocked, and then proven right when they finally agreed to shut him up. Instead of apologizing, they banned him from practicing medicine and kicked him out of Austria, even though he saved thousands to tens of thousands of lives. He finally cut himself with a dirty scalpel to commit suicide. Vonnegut uses him as an example of how idiots in power don't care about hurting or killing other people, only that other people believe that they are right.

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein was a world famous mathematician and physicist. His name is so synonymous with brilliance, that to be a young genius is to be "An Einstein." Vonnegut respects Albert Einstein as a thinker, and lifts him up as an individual who was not listened to by decision makers of his time, which resulted in the arms race, Cold War, and everything that followed. Einstein is also an example of a brilliant man, who gave up on humanity. He should have been listened to, but was not.

Hap Ludd

Hap Ludd was a textile worker in England during the beginning of the industrial revolution. When he saw that a machine was going to replace him and make it impossible for him to provide for his family, he destroyed several of them. Thus, a Luddite refers to a person who hates technology. Vonnegut says he is called a Luddite by some people, and agrees with them proudly.

Saul Steinberg

Saul Steinberg is one of the characters Vonnegut knows personally. This alone makes him stick out, since many of the people the author refers to are public figures. However,

Saul Steinberg is named as the single most wise man the author knows. Saul is an immigrant from an Eastern European country who always takes six seconds to think before he will answer any question, and seems to have an answer for the questions that even perplex Vonnegut himself the most.

Uncles Dan & Alex

Although these are two different people, Kurt uses them as character contrasts to make a point about his own life and philosophies. Both are uncles that Vonnegut talks to after arriving home after World War II. His Uncle Dan, a veteran himself, makes a statement about how Kurt is now a man, and Vonnegut distinctly does not like him. In almost complete contrast, Vonnegut's Uncle Alex is Harvard educated, an insurance salesman, and never fought in a battle. Alex talks about how his biggest complaint is that most people don't even realize when they are happy. That has stuck around with the author ever since.

Objects/Places

Dresden

Dresden is a German city where Kurt Vonnegut, and other American prisoners of war, were held during the infamous firebombing of Dresden by the British. Over 135,000 Germans died in a single night. Vonnegut's memories were the basis of one of his finest novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Humor/Comedy

Humor and comedy, by Vonnegut's definitions, are much more than they appear. Not only is good comedy material that makes you laugh, because it is linked to death and tragedy, but also a necessary self-defense mechanism that allows people to remain somewhat together in a really screwed-up world.

New York City

New York City is one of Kurt Vonnegut's places of residence. One chapter that discusses a daily routine he once enjoyed before the advent of computers focused solely on this location, including going to a post office located right by a United Nations. This is one of the longest sections of the book where the setting is in one specific place.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a worldwide, economic depression that was rampant during Vonnegut's youth. It lasted for over a decade and only ended with the ending of World War II. Vonnegut remembers it as a hard time that had great comedy because of it.

World War II

World War II was the largest war that the world has ever seen, spanning from the late 1930s to 1945. While there was a European and a Pacific front, Vonnegut fought in Europe and was captured during battle. He was held at Dresden with other Americans, and witnessed Britain's infamous firebombing of the civilian population. These memories are a major part of who Vonnegut is, and he refers back to them constantly. World War II is also generally viewed as a "moral war," where war was simply the right thing to do. Vonnegut uses his veteran status in this war to give weight to his judgment on current conflicts.

Luddite

A Luddite is a term for someone who hates technology. The phrase comes from an English textile worker, Hap Ludd, who sabotaged several machines that he saw would put him out of business. Luddite is a term that generally has negative connotations, though Vonnegut has an entire chapter of his book devoted to why he is proud to be called a Luddite and why he is against new technology.

PPs

PPs is short for psychopathic personalities. Vonnegut uses this to describe the attitudes of many of the politicians he sees is office, though it also has a general usage. It is for the personality of a person who is vehemently against any and everything science says, decides his/her idea is Gospel law, and will do anything and destroy anyone to be heard and refuse to ever be wrong. In Vonnegut's eyes, the George W. Bush white house is full of PPs, which is a terrifying thought.

Saab

Saab is a Swedish company that got into the business of making cars. While a Saab nowadays is a high-class luxury vehicle, Vonnegut owned a Saab dealership when they first started making cars and declared them among the worst in the world. Like a lawn mower, oil had to be mixed with gas at every stop, it had "suicide doors," an odd engine, and had so many ways to break down. The result of this was Vonnegut bashed Swedish engineering, which he jokes is why he never won a Nobel Prize.

U. S. Constitution

The U.S. Constitution was signed by the founding fathers and guarantees the rights of every American citizen. It was aimed to protect the American people from tyranny, both external and internal. Vonnegut laments that so many of the inherent rights in the Constitution are being changed, ignored, or thrown away completely, something that he views as inexcusable and tragic.

The Sermon on the Mount

In the New Testament of the Christian Holy Bible, The Sermon on the Mount is a series of teachings that Jesus preaches to his disciples and to everyone else who will listen. This included "The Beatitudes," both of which Vonnegut mentions several times as teachings that should be followed, even though he is not a Christian, but a Humanist.

The Beatitudes

The Beatitudes are Christian teachings that come from the Sermon on the Mount. This is the series of teachings that basically follow the format of blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy, blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, etc. Vonnegut refers to these as some of the most beautiful teachings mankind has ever received.

Themes

Dependency on Oil

Out of all the various themes and arguments that Vonnegut brings up, this one is perhaps the most constant. The United States', and for that matter, the world's, dependency on oil is seen by Vonnegut as akin to a heroin junkie. There are no positive benefits to the drug or addiction, but it is incredibly harmful and causes otherwise rational nations to be doing things they have no right to be doing. Not only is the pollution from fossil fuels making water undrinkable and air unbreathable, but it is also causing global warming, which is going to eventually hurt everyone. Vonnegut argues that it is the worst addiction, since you can fill up a vehicle, run over the neighbor's pet while going eighty miles an hour, polluting the air, breaking the peace and quiet, and if you crash, then oil can kill you.

Vonnegut's analysis of the U.S.'s dependency on fossil fuels is one way he can help to explain the actions of the government. The United States is picking wars with countries they have no business picking fights with, invading some, making allies with terrorist nations, because they will sell us cheap oil, and acting insane. Vonnegut says this is like the junkie who is running out of supply and knows the game is up. The junkie will steal from relatives, break windows to rob stores, mug people, and commit a whole series of crimes and atrocities that in his right mind, he would never even imagine. He says this is what the United States is doing, and his comparisons make a frighteningly convincing argument.

Humor and Tragedy

The second strongest theme of Vonnegut's novel is that of humor and comedy, and its natural attachment to tragedy and death. The best comedy has good humor, and good humor, according to the author, is naturally bound to the possibility of bad things. The need to laugh often comes with the need to cry, or when something is wrong and there just is no other reaction. Laurel and Hardy are given as an example of great comedy, because they were so out of place innocent in the world that part of you was always afraid that the world would kill them. The need to joke and laugh is a natural defense mechanism against life itself. Being a human means being miserable in a miserable world. That is, unless you can see enough of the funny things about life, especially during the worst times, to keep yourself going through it all.

Mark Twain is an author that Vonnegut quotes often as an example of a genius, and someone who saw how incredibly important it was to have humor to defend against the world around him. Vonnegut strongly argues that this is necessary to go through life with any type of hope whatsoever, but also says that people who live too long lose this ability. He once again points out Twain as a prime example of this, of Einstein, and finally of himself. That seeing too many people one loves die, that watching a world that

just keeps getting more and more insane is eventually too much, and the humor mechanism is no longer enough of a defense.

War

War is a theme that comes up often in this book, as well as others by Vonnegut. The reasons for this are multiple. One is that Vonnegut was a veteran of World War II, as well as a prisoner of war. This happened in his youth, and as with anyone who has ever been through that experience and lived to tell about it, it left a lasting impression. Part of the way war is portrayed in this novel is from the perspective of Vonnegut, who was a foot soldier in World War II. As this was considered a great and moral war, he has the ability to keenly, in his view, criticize a war that seems completely phony, unjust, and unfair to the brave men and women who are being forced to serve. Vonnegut is very careful to say he is not against the troops, he really feels sorry for them. He sees them as being used carelessly, in a way that he was never used and abused.

War is a natural theme, as well, because it is the epitome of human greed and stupidity. Even the "moral war" of World War II was tragic, and Vonnegut is sure to point that out. Great Britain was an alley, but he calls their firebombing of Dresden an atrocity. What did the 130,000 civilians, men, women, and children have to do with the war? The notion of a pre-emptive strike also angers Vonnegut, who calls it what it is, an invasion.

Style

Point of View

This novel is written from a first person point of view, that of Kurt Vonnegut, and is autobiographical narrator. Since this novel is concentrated on ideas and not on a chronological series of events, the author is a fairly reliable narrator. However, it is sometimes hard to tell, because he will intentionally make statements that are open to interpretation, and thus can be either a joke or a serious statement, or even both. Since this book is composed of philosophical ideas, based on the experiences from his life, this is the only point of view that could have worked for the novel. Only Kurt Vonnegut can tell the reader what he thinks, feels and remembers. Many of the essays in this work are based upon observation. Vonnegut does a great job of allowing the reader to see his point of view through his eyes, by always following a statement or a declaration with an observation, connecting the two firmly and allowing the reader to understand all the connections, even if he or she disagrees with them.

Setting

The setting of this novel varies from chapter to chapter and even section to section. This novel is partially autobiographical. However, since it is driven by ideas and philosophies, and written from Vonnegut in the present, not only does the physical location vary wildly from section to section, but even the time. Time wise much of what Vonnegut has to say involves the present, especially surrounding the Bush administration from the year 2000 to 2005, when the book is first released. Vonnegut also spends a good amount of time talking about Dresden, Germany, where he was an American prisoner of war in World War II. One chapter is set in New York City in either the late sixties or early seventies, but Vonnegut even includes people, times, and places that existed before he was even born. Historically, he will talk about Abraham Lincoln at the battle of Antietam, or arguing in congress before he ever became President. Vonnegut also quotes Mark Twain frequently, talks about Albert Einstein, and about a Hungarian doctor who died over fifty years before Vonnegut was born. The settings vary widely but, in the end, even the settings in the past or guesses on the future are there specifically to bring focus to the present situation. For example, though Vonnegut often discusses Mark Twain, or his own time as a prisoner of the Germans, both are to make a point of how important humor is in the now, the present.

Language and Meaning

Kurt Vonnegut is a master at the use of the English language. One of his virtually unparalleled strengths is the use of grotesque or dark humor to make the reader laugh while reading a section that does not initially come off as funny. Vonnegut is also known for his sarcasm and satire, and for his ability to disguise these with actual seriousness.

Often times Vonnegut will make a statement that initially the reader feels obligated to take as a joke, but the language will be so vague that there really is no way of knowing whether he is serious or not. This mastery of the ability to misdirect and muddle the reader is one of the traits that makes Vonnegut's writing style so distinctive.

Vonnegut tries to make even the darkest of his material funny. Generally, he succeeds, admirably. Tragedy and humor are always found holding hands, and many of the sentences and statements he intentionally leaves fuzzy have one interpretation of each. Did he mean to shoot the Vice President, or is he cracking an off humor joke? The reader can re-read the passage one hundred times, and he or she will only be even more confused than when they started. Vonnegut's ability to bend language and bend the meanings into one, two, or more possible roads keeps his text fresh even decades after it is written.

Structure

This 137-page book is split into twelve chapters, each standing alone as an essay. While there are overriding themes and styles, this is a good choice by Vonnegut, who likes to jump around a lot even within the chapters anyway, but at least this gave him some structure to keep somewhat in line. While partially autobiographical, Vonnegut is wise to have ideas and thoughts move the story along, as this gives him much more authority to use his humorous writing style to make a point, and re-visit that same point further down the line. Vonnegut's best arguments are not made in a solid order with bullet points going down a list, but more like several strands that combine to make a vine and run through out the entire work. This works well, and especially since sometimes the best argument Vonnegut can make includes a memory from childhood, one from World War II, and then one from the present day. He could not combine these in a conventional chronological structure, but with this structure, he could do exactly that. For this type of book, one held together by ideas supported by memories, this was the perfect format for Vonnegut to make his point, including a very brief poem (requiem) at the end to bring his entire point home.

Quotes

"While we were being bombed in Dresden sitting in a cellar with our arms over our heads in case the ceiling fell, one soldier said as though he were a duchess in a mansion on a cold and rainy night, 'I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight.' Nobody laughed, but we were still all glad he said it. At least we were still alive! He proved it." Chapter 1, p. 5

"Do you realize that all great literature - *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Bible*, and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' - are all about what a bummer it is to be a human being? (Isn't it such a relief to have somebody say that?)" Chapter 2, p. 9

"'Socialism' is no more an evil word than 'Christianity.' Socialism no more prescribed Joseph Stalin and his secret police and shuttered churches than Christianity prescribed the Spanish Inquisition. Christianity and Socialism alike, in fact, prescribe a society dedicated to the proposition that all men, women, and children are created equal and shall not starve." Chapter 2, p. 11

"I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresents life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex." Chapter 2, p. 17

"Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college." Chapter 3, p. 23

"If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake." Chapter 4, p. 24

"And if I die - God forbid - I would like to go to heaven to ask somebody in charge up there, 'Hey, what was the good news and what was the bad news?'" Chapter 4, p. 37

"I know what women want: a whole lot of people to talk to. What do they want to talk about? They want to talk about everything. What do men want? They want a lot of pals, and they wish people wouldn't get so mad at them." Chapter 5, p. 47

"I sure wish I could wave a wand, and give every one of you an extended family, make you an Ibo or a Navaho - or a Kennedy." Chapter 5, p. 49

"And we have contraptions like computers that cheat you out of becoming. Bill Gates says 'Wait till you see what your computer can become.' But it's you who should be doing the becoming, not the damn fool computer. What you can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do." Chapter 6, p. 56

"How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you any different." Chapter 6, p. 62

"That war only made billionaires out of millionaires. Today's war is making trillionaires out of billionaires. Now I call that progress." Chapter 7, p. 67

"Foreigners love us for our jazz. And they don't hate us for our purported liberty and justice for all. They hate us now for our arrogance." Chapter 7, p. 69

"It seems to me as if everyone is living as members of Alcoholics Anonymous do, day by day. And a few more days will be enough. I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildren." Chapter 7, p. 70-71

"By saying that our leaders are power-drunk chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East? Their morale, like so many lifeless bodies, is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got for Christmas." Chapter 7, p.71-72

"How do humanists feel about Jesus? I say of Jesus, as all humanists do, 'If what he said is good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not?'" Chapter 8, p. 80

"In case you haven't noticed, our unelected leaders have dehumanized millions and millions of human beings simply because of their religion and race. We wound 'em and kill 'em and torture 'em and imprison 'em all we want." Chapter 8, p.87

"Napalm came from Harvard. *Veritas!*" Chapter 8, p. 88

"Doesn't anything socialistic make you want to throw up? Like great public schools, or health insurance for all?" Chapter 9, p. 97

"What about God? If He were alive today? Gil Herman says, 'God would have to be an atheist, because the excrement has hit the air-conditioning big time, big time." Chapter 11, p. 119

"Might not it be possible, then, that the Second World War was a cause of the first one? Otherwise, the first one remains inexplicable nonsense of the most gruesome kind. Or try this: Is it possible that seemingly incredible geniuses like Bach and Shakespeare and Einstein were not in fact super-human, but simply plagiarists, copying great stuff from the future?" Chapter 11, p.120

"And I said good-bye to my friend, hung up the phone, sat down and wrote this epitaph: 'The good Earth - we could have saved it, but we were too damn cheap and lazy.'" Chapter 11, p. 122

"I came to speak ill of Swedish engineering, and so diddled myself out of a Nobel Prize." Chapter 12, p.128

"Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself. Finally, you get just too tired, and the news is too awful, and humor doesn't work anymore. Somebody like Mark Twain thought life was quite awful but held the awfulness at bay with jokes and so forth, but finally he couldn't do it anymore. His wife, his best friend, and two of his daughters had died. If you live long enough, a lot of people close to you are going to die." Chapter 12, p.129

"All I really wanted to do was give people the relief of laughing. Humor can be a relief, like an aspirin tablet. If a hundred years from now people are still laughing, I'd certainly be pleased." Chapter 12, p.130

"I said, 'Saul, how should I feel about Picasso?'

Six seconds passed, and then he said, 'God put him on Earth to show us what it's like to be really rich.'

I said, 'Saul, I am a novelist, and many of my friends are novelists and good ones, but when we talk I keep feeling we are in two very different businesses. What makes me feel that way?'

Six seconds passed, and then he said, 'It's very simple. There are two sorts of artists, one not being in the least superior to the other. But one responds to the history of his or her art so far, and the other responds to life itself.'

I said, 'Saul, are you *gifted*?'

Six seconds passed, and then he growled, 'No, but what you respond to in any work of art is the artist's struggle against his or her limitations.'" Chapter 12, p. 135

Topics for Discussion

Kurt Vonnegut often argues that humor and comedy are the best, and most natural, self-defenses against the world around us. Citing examples from the book, do you agree or disagree with the author's assessment?

Vonnegut makes a fairly inflammatory statement, when he calls the U.S. government full of "power hungry chimpanzees." Does absolute power corrupt? Why or why not?

Vonnegut figures out how to write *Slaughterhouse-Five* only after the wife of an old war buddy yells at them for telling war stories. What kind of "truths" do you think realizing this allowed Vonnegut to reveal in his writing? What is the difference between the two perspectives?

Are humor and tragedy linked? Why or why not?

Vonnegut makes strong cases for certain aspects of Socialism. Do you agree or disagree with his statements? Do you think he makes a good case? Include specific details with your response.

Vonnegut has strong feelings about technology, and how it robs people of the experiences they should really pay attention to. Do you agree? Think about reasons for both sides of the argument and compare them.

The author seems very pessimistic about the future. What bothers or scares you most about the future? Do your possible concerns relate to anything in the book?

There are times when Kurt Vonnegut seems to encourage young people to stand up and fight, and other times when he seems resigned to what is coming. What is your personal reaction and why?

Kurt Vonnegut makes the statement that all great literature is about what a bummer it is to be human. Do you agree with this statement? If not, cite examples to contradict his claims.

The title of this book is *A Man Without A Country*. Do you share the same feelings as the author? If not, have you ever felt this way about anything you belonged to? Discuss.