Slaughterhouse-Five Study Guide

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In 1969, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was not especially well known or commercially successful, despite having already published five novels and two short story collections. The publication of *Slaughterhouse Five* in that year marked Vonnegut's artistic and commercial breakthrough. Based on Vonnegut's own experiences as a World War IT prisoner who witnessed the Allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man who has come "unstuck in time." Without any forewarning, he finds himself suddenly transported to other points in time in his own past or future. In chronicling the extraordinary events that happen to Billy, from witnessing the Dresden firebombing to being kidnapped by aliens, *Slaughterhouse-Five* summarizes many of the themes of Vonnegut's work. These include the dangers of unchecked technology, the limitations of human action in a seemingly random and meaningless universe, and the need for people, adrift in an indifferent world, to treat one another with kindness and decency. Almost thirty years after its initial publication, *Slaughterhouse-Five* remains Vonnegut's most discussed and widely admired novel.

Overview

Vonnegut's dramatic, tragic younger life greatly influences his fiction and establishes a framework for most of his themes. His immigrant family achieved the grandest of American dreams, only to have its success shattered by economic and political change. Traditional American values such as common sense, self-reliance, and practicality are juxtaposed in his fiction with the absurdity of fate and the folly of humankind. Such folly is epitomized by the bombing of Dresden (now part of East Germany) on February 13, 1945, only a few months before the end of World War II. Dresden was an unarmed, historic city of no military importance, and the motive for the Allied decision to bomb it into oblivion is still a mystery. The twohour bombing killed 135,000 people.

It is against the backdrop of the bombing of Dresden that the dark world of Slaughterhouse-Five emerges. The hauntingly innocent main character, Billy Pilgrim, exudes a childlike wonder that such an atrocity could have been perpetuated. The mythical world of Tralfamadore, a product of Billy's innocence and perhaps of his insanity, stands as an alternative to a world in which nuclear weapons have given humankind the ability to obliterate life on earth.

Author Biography

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Kurt and Edith (Lieber) Vonnegut. Vonnegut's father was a successful architect, and his mother's family ran an equally successful brewery. However, the onset of Prohibition, followed *by* the Great Depression, as well as anti-German sentiment in the wake of World War I, put the Vonnegut family under severe economic and social distress. As an undergraduate at Cornell, Vonnegut wrote articles for the school newspaper opposing American entry into World War II. After Pearl Harbor, however, Vonnegut put aside his reservations about the war and joined the U.S. Army in January, l943. World War II saw his family's fortunes sink even lower, leading to his mother's suicide in May, l944. Vonnegut was taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge. In February, 1945, while in a German prison camp, he witnessed the Allied firebombing of Dresden, an experience which later became an important part of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five.*

After being liberated *by* Soviet troops in April, 1945, Vonnegut returned to the United States and was awarded the Purple Heart. He married Jane Cox in September of that year and enrolled in the graduate program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. His master's thesis was rejected, however, and in 1947 Vonnegut moved to Schenectady, New York, where he went to work as a public relations writer for the General Electric Research Laboratory. His experiences at General Electric also found their way into his fiction, most notably his first novel, *Player Piano* (l952). While working for *GE,* Vonnegut was also writing fiction. After publishing several short stories and his first novel, he resigned from the company in 1951 and moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to become a full-time writer.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Vonnegut published several novels and numerous short stories. Novels such as *The Sirens* of *Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and God *Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) increased his reputation from that of a little-known author of science fiction to an "underground" favorite with a small but loyal audience. After God *Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* appeared, Vonnegut taught at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, an experience which encouraged him to be more innovative and autobiographical in his writing. The result was *Slaughterhouse-Five,* the publication of which marked the beginning of Vonnegut's widespread fame.

Although Vonnegut's works of the 1970s received uneven critical response. his popularity continued to grow. In 197l, having separated from his wife, he moved to New York City. In that same year. the University of Chicago accepted *Cat's* Cradle in lieu of a thesis paper and finally awarded Vonnegut his master's degree in anthropology. In 1979. he married photographer Jill Krementz. During the 1970s and l980s Vonnegut continued to produce novels, such as *Breakfast* of *Champions* (1973), *Slapstick* (1976), *Jailbird* (1979), and *Galapagos* (1985), as well as various essays and articles collected in *Wampeters. Foma, and Granfalloons* (1974) and *Palm Sunday* (1981), and a play, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1970). Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, Vonnegut has achieved a level of fame unusual for an American writer. Until his death on April 11, 2007, he was a commentator on social issues and an outspoken opponent of

censorship and militarism. He continues to be not merely a well-known novelist, but a significant figure in American culture.

About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922, the son of accomplished German immigrants. His grandfather held the distinction of being the first licensed architect in Indiana; his father was also an architect, while his mother's side of the family owned prosperous breweries.

Prohibition's outlawing of alcoholic beverages, which went into effect in 1919, had already curtailed the brewery business at the time of Vonnegut's birth, but he enjoyed an affluent, privileged childhood nonetheless. Family finances suffered, however, during the Great Depression, as the demand for new building construction tapered off.

Vonnegut attended high school in Indianapolis and began his writing career on the school newspaper. He continued his journalistic endeavors with the Cornell Daily Sun, the college newspaper of Cornell University, where he majored in biochemistry. Vonnegut left school to enlist in the U.S. Army in 1942. Arriving home on special leave for Mother's Day in 1944, Vonnegut found that his mother had committed suicide the night before by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. After returning to his unit, he was captured at the Battle of the Bulge (fought in France from December 16, 1944, to January 16, 1945) and imprisoned in Dresden, Germany, for the remainder of the war. Held captive in an underground meat storage cellar, Vonnegut survived the British and American bombings that leveled the city. He was liberated by the Russians and awarded one of America's highest military honors, the Purple Heart.

Vonnegut attended the University of Chicago after the war and then worked as a police reporter. From 1947 to 1950 he was a publicist for General Electric Corporation in Schenectady, New York, where he learned much about the technology that would later permeate his fiction. Leaving General Electric in 1950, Vonnegut turned to writing fulltime, gaining a minor reputation as a science fiction writer but receiving little acclaim. It was not until the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five in 1969 that Vonnegut received any serious critical attention. After the success of this novel, however, his earlier works were republished, and he came to be regarded as one of America's most original and provocative writers.

Plot Summary

Part I-Introduction

Slaughterhouse-Five tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man who has come "unstuck in time." At any point in his life, he may find himself suddenly at another point in his past or future. Billy's experiences as an American prisoner of war in Germany during World War II are told in more or less chronological order, but these events are continually interrupted by Billy's travels to various other times in his life.

At several points in the novel, including the whole of Chapter One, Vonnegut addresses the reader directly. In the opening chapter, the author mentions his own real-life experiences as a prisoner of war-in particular, his witnessing of the Allied firebombing of the German City of Dresden-and discusses the difficulties he had over the years in writing about his war experiences. He also tells of his visit with Bernard O'Hare, who was a prisoner along with Vonnegut, and of their trip back to Germany. When O'Hare's wife learns that Vonnegut is planning to write a book about he war, she becomes angry, thinking that Vonnegut will glamorize the war. The author promises her that he will not and that he will call his book "The Children's Crusade."

Part II-Billy Pilgrim in the War

Chapter Two begins Billy Pilgrim's story. Born in Ilium, New York, in 1922, Billy is drafted into the Army during World War II. Assigned to the post of Chaplin's assistant, Billy is sent overseas to Europe, where, in 1944, his regiment is all but destroyed during the Battle of the Bulge. The only survivors are Billy, two experienced scouts, and Roland Weary, a sadistic bully whose hobbies include collecting instruments of torture. The other three soldiers are reasonably well-clad and armed, but Billy has "no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots." While wandering with the other three soldiers, Billy has his first experience of being "unstuck in time," travelling in quick succession to several points in his past and future before returning to 1944.

Eventually, the two scouts desert Billy and Roland, for which Roland blames Billy. The two are quickly captured by a band of German soldiers who have ambushed and killed the two scouts. They are then transported to a prison camp aboard a horribly overcrowded train. Several prisoners die along the way, including Roland Weary, who has contracted gangrene. Before he dies, Weary blames Billy for his death and asks the other soldiers to avenge him.

After ten days on the train, Billy and the other prisoners arrive at a prison camp originally used to exterminate Russian prisoners. After being processed into the camp, the Americans are enthusiastically greeted by the British prisoners, who have been in the camp for over four years. While the Americans are in terrible shape physically and emotionally, the British have kept them selves in excellent condition. Appalled at the

sorry state of the Americans, the British offer them food and clothing, and even entertain them with a play of *Cinderella.* The Americans are made sick by the rich food. Billy, who is in even worse shape than many of the others, falls into an hysterical fit during the play and has to be restrained and tranquilized. He is taken to the prison hospital, where he meets Paul Lazzaro, who had befriended Roland Weary on the prison train and promised Weary that he would one day kill Billy as an ac of revenge.

The American prisoners are transferred to the German city of Dresden, an "open city" with no strategic value that is supposed to be safe from at tack. They are housed in an abandoned slaughter house-Slaughterhouse-Five. At one point they are visited by Howard W. Campbell, Jr., an American who has gone over to the Nazis. When Campbel tries to talk the prisoners into switching sides, h is roundly condemned by Edgar Derby, a forty four-year-old schoolteacher who has nursed Billy in the prison hospital and who is by now the unofficial leader of the American prisoners.

One night, while the Americans are under ground in the slaughterhouse meat locker, Dresde is firebombed by the Allies, who have chosen t, attack the city despite its lack of military significance. When the soldiers return to the surface the next morning, they find the entire city has been destroyed and almost all its inhabitants have bee killed:

The guards told the Americans to form in ranks of four, which they did. Then they had them march back to the hog barn which had been their home. Its walls still stood, but Its windows and roof were gone, and there was nothing inside but ashes and dollops of melted glass. It was realized then that there was no food or water, and that the survivors, If they were going to continue to survive, were going to have to climb over curve after curve on the face of the moon.
Which they did.
The curves were smooth only when seen from a distance. The people climbing them had learned that they were treacherous, Jagged things-hot to the touch, often unstable-eager, should certain important rocks be disturbed, to tumble some more, to form lower, more solid curves.
Nobody talked much as the expedition crossed the moon. There was nothing appropriate to say. One thing was clear Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in It represented a flaw in the design There were to be no moon men at all.
135,000 civilians are killed in the raid, almost twice the number who would later die at Hiroshima.

The German guards who had been in the meat locker with the Americans march the prisoners to a suburb, where they are taken in by a blind innkeeper and housed in a stable. The Americans are then taken back into Dresden and forced to dig through the ruins for bodies. Edgar Derby, after being caught taking a teapot from the ruins, is executed by a firing squad. Eventually, however, the war in Europe ends, and Billy and the surviving prisoners return home.

Part III-Billy Back Home

Back in Ilium, Billy resumes classes at the Ilium School of Optometry, where he had been a student before the war. During ills senior year, he becomes engaged to Valencia Merble, the wealthy daughter of the owner of the optometry school. Shortly after his engagement, Billy suffers "a mild nervous collapse," checks himself into a veteran's hospital near Lake Placid, and undergoes electroshock therapy. Six months after leaving the hospital and graduating from optometry school, he marries Valencia.

Billy's life from this point on is one of unexpected material prosperity, as ills father-in-law sets him up in a lucrative optometry practice. He and Valencia have two children, Barbara and Robert. However, Billy continues to come "unstuck in time," periodically and without warning, a condition he does not discuss with anyone.

Part IV-Billy on Tralfamadore

In 1967, on his daughter's wedding night, Billy is kidnapped by aliens from the planet Tralfarnadore. The aliens take him back to their home planet and display him naked in a cage. After being on display for some time, Billy is joined by Montana Wildhack, a movie actress. They become lovers and have a child together. Finally, Billy is returned to Earth, while Montana stays behind to take care of their child. When Billy returns, it is only a moment after he left. He has not even been missed.

While on Tralfamadore, Billy learns of the aliens' philosophy of time and death. For Tralfamadorians, time is not a linear progression of events, but a constant condition: "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist." Like Billy, the aliens can travel back and forth to different moments in time. They do not consider death a significant event, Since when a person dies he or she "is still very much alive in the past." The Tralfamadorians advise Billy "to concentrate on the happy moments of life, and to ignore the unhappy ones."

Part V-Billy Back on Earth

At first, Billy does not tell anyone of his kidnapping. A year later, however, while on a chartered flight to an optometrists' convention, his plane crashes, and everyone on board is killed except for Billy and the copilot. Valencia, desperately trying to get to the hospital to see Billy, is killed in an auto accident.

After his release from the hospital, Billy returns home, but soon travels to New York, where he shows up at a radio talk show and, mistaken for someone else, is allowed to go on the air. He tells the story of hIS captivity on Tralfamadore and is "gently expelled" from the studio. Billy's daughter Barbara and her husband come to New York and take Billy home, after which he begins to write letters to newspapers telling of his experiences with aliens.

Billy dies on February 13, 1976-the anniversary of the Dresden bombing He is gunned down by an assassin hired by Paul Lazzaro, who is still alive and has never forgotten his promise to kill Billy. However, Billy the time traveller "has seen his own death many times" and is unconcerned. After the shooting, Billy "experiences death for a while" and then "swings back into life again" at a point in 1945, "an hour after his life was threatened by Lazzaro" Billy, like the Tralfamadorians, regards death with a shrug and a "So It goes." There will always be another moment

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Kurt Vonnegut tells the reader that he did actually know someone who was killed in Dresden for taking a teapot and he really did know someone who said he would hire gunmen to kill his enemies after the war. Moreover, he really did go back to Dresden after the war in 1967, thanks to Guggenheim money. He went back with his friend Bernard V. O'Hare. He met and befriended a taxi driver who took him to the slaughterhouse where he hid with other POWs during the Dresden bombing.

He says that is was not easy to write about the Dresden bombing, despite his best intentions. A friend asks Vonnegut if his book about the Dresden bombing will be an anti-war book. Vonnegut says yes. His friend replies, "Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?" (3)

Vonnegut gets drunk one night and has the phone company look up his friend Bernard V. O'Hare. He talks to him about his idea of writing about the Dresden bombing. Bernard does not know much about writing, so he is not much help.

Then Vonnegut describes how he once wrote a great outline for the book in crayon on the back of a roll of wallpaper. He drew one line in one color for each person in the story and each line ended when the person died. All the lines ended on the day he and all the other prisoners he was with were exchanged for Russian prisoners. As they rode back from the exchange, a British soldier shows him his secret treasure of a plaster model of the Eiffel Tower with a clock in it. Then he came home, was married and had kids.

Sometimes he tries to call up old girlfriends, but the phone company cannot find them. Sometimes he thinks about his education at the University of Chicago. He tells his father he has never written a book with a villain in it because the University of Chicago's Anthropology Department told him that there is no difference between anybody.

He remembers his job working as a reporter while he was in college. The toughest reporters were women. One of them tells him to pretend he is from the Fire Department to get a statement from a woman whose husband was killed in a freak accident in an elevator. She asks if the sight of the body bothered him, but he replies that he saw much worse in World War II.

Vonnegut mentions that more people were killed in the Dresden raid than at Hiroshima. He tells someone about the Dresden raid. The person he was talking to tells him about the atrocities of the concentration camps. Vonnegut just responds that he knows.

He continues to work in Schenectady. He and his wife meet other veterans. The friendliest and funniest ones who hate war the most actually fought. He tries to get information about the raid from the Air Force, but they tell him that it is secret.

Vonnegut travels with his family to O'Hare's house. His young daughters have to stop and see the Hudson River because they had never seen a river before.

Vonnegut sits down to talk with O'Hare. Mary, Bernard's wife, is angry and interrupts them constantly. Eventually, she tells Vonnegut that she is angry at him for wanting to write a book where he and her husband are big heroes that will be played in the movie version by big stars when they were really "just babies" (14). Vonnegut tells her that he does not want to do that. He tells her that he will call the book *The Children's Crusade*.

Vonnegut and O'Hare look up the Children's Crusade and learn it was actually a ploy by two monks in 1213 to sell large groups of children into slavery in North Africa. In another book, Vonnegut reads about the Prussian destruction of Dresden in 1760.

As the Vonnegut family returns home, they stop at the World's Fair in New York. In an aside to his publisher, Vonnegut says that the book is short and jumbled because that is how massacres are. Then he says that he has told his sons never to take part in massacres of any kind.

When he tries to travel with O'Hare to Germany, he is stuck in Boston because of fog. Time drags on endlessly as he waits. He reads about a French World War I veteran named Céline who became a doctor and wrote grotesque novels at night. Then he reads about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and how Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt because she looked back. Vonnegut says that he is a pillar of salt too.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter, obviously, lists Vonnegut's reasons for writing the book. However, it also prepares the reader for Vonnegut's scattershot style of pulling in several different, entirely random thoughts into an only partially cohesive whole. The collision of these different thoughts symbolizes the undisciplined pointlessness of war.

When Vonnegut hears about the concentration camps, he just responds angrily that he knows about it. He says this because he knows that the Germans killed a lot of people, but that does not mean he is happy about the fact that many people were killed in the bombing of Dresden. When Vonnegut reads about the destruction of Dresden in 1760, it symbolizes the fact that Vonnegut's experience really was not anything new.

The closing lines of Chapter 1 are: "It begins like this: *Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.* And ends like this: *Poo-tee-weet?*" (22) By telling the first and last lines of the book in the first chapter, these lines parallel the way that Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Billy Pilgrim is "unstuck in time" (23). He moves from one moment of his life to another as though they did not happen in any order. He cannot control where he goes next and many of the trips are unpleasant.

Pilgrim is born in 1922 in Ilium, New York. He fights in World War II, goes to the Ilium School of Optometry, has a nervous breakdown, returns to his studies, marries the founder and owner of the school, becomes an optometrist, and makes a lot of money selling frames for safety glasses.

Billy has two children. His daughter marries another optometrist and Billy sets him up in business. His son is a troublemaker in high school, but straightens out in the army, where he becomes a Green Beret in Vietnam. Billy survives a plane crash and his wife is accidentally killed by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Billy comes home from the hospital, and then goes to New York City and talks on the radio about having become unstuck in time. He is kidnapped by a flying saucer in 1967 and displayed naked in a zoo on Tralfamadore with the actress Montana Wildhack. His daughter is shocked that he would say this and she brings him back to Ilium.

Billy writes a letter to the Ilium *News Leader* describing the Tralfamadorans. They look like two-foot tall plungers with their suction cups on the bottom and a flexible shaft pointing straight up. On top of the shaft, there is a hand with a green eye in the palm. They are friendly and they see in four dimensions.

When someone dies, Tralfamadorans know that the person only seems to die. The dead are still alive in the still existing past. When someone dies, they just say, "So it goes." (27) They see time as we see the Rocky Mountains: as a series of permanent fixtures.

Billy works feverishly on his second letter. He is in his house, where the temperature is only 50 degrees because the thermostat is broken. His daughter, Barbara, rings the doorbell, but Billy does not answer. She enters the house, puts Billy to bed and calls a repairman to fix the thermostat. Barbara thinks Billy is senile and needs to be cared for.

Billy actually comes unstuck in time in 1944. He is a chaplain's assistant in the army and has no friends. On maneuvers in South Carolina, an umpire in their war game tells them that their congregation was spotted from the air and killed. The men all laugh and eat lunch. Then Billy is given a furlough because his father dies in a hunting accident.

Billy is sent overseas and is caught behind German lines in the Battle of the Bulge. He and an anti-tank gunner named Roland Weary follow two army scouts through the

woods. Someone shoots at them. The others dive for cover, but Billy gives the shooter another chance. Roland pulls him angrily into a ditch.

Roland Weary is a stupid, fat, bully of a young soldier who wants to be a war hero. He was unpopular at home and had no friends. His father collects torture instruments. Roland carries every piece of army equipment he was every issued. He also carries a picture a copy of the first dirty picture ever to be taken: a naked woman attempting to have sex with a Shetland pony.

The scouts tell them it is time to move. Weary feels like he is the leader because he is doing the most, even though everything he does is pointless and pleases no one. He has delusions of military heroism and imagines that he and the scouts have banded together and call themselves the Three Musketeers.

Billy comes unstuck in time. He returns to the womb. Then he is in the YMCA with his father, who teaches him how to swim by throwing him into the deep end of the pool. He falls unconscious on the bottom of the pool as someone rescues him, which he resents.

Billy is in a nursing home visiting his mother, who no one expects to live through a bout with pneumonia. However, she does survive. He sees the body of a former marathon runner being wheeled out. Then he goes to the waiting room and reads about Private Eddie D. Slovik, the only American to be shot for cowardice since the Civil War.

Then Billy is drunk at a party and about to be unfaithful to his wife for the first and only time. Then he crawls into his car and tries to drive home. He thinks his steering wheel has been stolen. He wakes up the next morning and realizes he got into the back seat.

Billy returns to World War II. Roland Weary is shaking him to his senses. Billy tells him to go on without him, but Weary refuses. Instead, he kicks and pushes Billy back to where the scouts are waiting. The scouts hear a German patrol looking for them. The scouts decide they will leave Weary and Pilgrim behind.

Billy is at a Chinese restaurant in 1957. He has just been elected president of the Lions Club and is about to make a speech. Billy is terrified because he has a very weak voice. However, he hears a very strong voice coming out of his mouth when he speaks to the crowd. He took a course on public speaking.

Returning to World War II, Weary takes out his frustration by beating up Billy. Billy sounds like he is laughing. Before Roland can kick Billy in the spinal cord, he sees that a German patrol is watching him and wondering why one American soldier would want to murder another one and why the other soldier would laugh.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Billy's last name is "Pilgrim" because he is on a symbolic spiritual journey. He travels through time much as others travel to important religious sites. He eventually becomes a sort of religious leader, telling everyone what he or she needs to know.

Roland Weary's name is also symbolic. Roland was a great hero of epic. Weary, of course, means "tired." Roland Weary symbolizes the worn out tale of military heroism.

Every time death is mentioned, the line, "So it goes," follows. This is a symbolic resignation to the fact that there is nothing you can do about death; it just happens.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Five German soldiers stare at Weary and Pilgrim. They are joined by a shivering German Shepherd named Princess that they borrowed from a farmer. They were assigned to mop up in the wake of the German advance.

Two of the Germans are in their teens. Two others are drooling, toothless old men. Their commander is a middle-aged corporal who is sick of war. The commander wears a pair of very nice boots that are all he owns in the world. Next to him stands a fifteen-year-old boy wearing wooden clogs held on his feet by canvas straps.

The fifteen-year-old helps Billy stand up. Then they hear the three German rifle shots that kill the army scouts who ditched Billy and Roland. They were waiting in ambush for the Germans, but they are shot from behind.

The middle-aged corporal searches Billy and Roland. They take Roland's trench knife, his bulletproof Bible and his picture of the girl with the pony. Then he makes Roland take off his boots and trade them with the fifteen-year-old.

Billy in his broken boots and Roland in his clogs are marched to a stone cottage where POWs are kept. Billy sleeps on the shoulder of a chaplain who happens to be a rabbi.

Billy travels in time to his optometry practice in Ilium. He is falling asleep as he is testing a female patient. He does not know what year it is. He looks out the window at the license plate on his car and sees that it is 1967. He reads an article about optometry and tries hard to care.

Billy returns to 1944 as a German soldier is kicking his feet and telling him to wake up. The Germans take pictures of Roland and Billy's footwear for propaganda. Then they throw Billy into a bush and take a picture of soldiers pretending to capture him.

Then Billy goes back to 1967. He is driving through a section of town that was wrecked by inner-city riots and the National Guard that came in to stop them. Then he arrives at a construction site for urban renewal.

Billy has a framed prayer in his office saying, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage the change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference." (60) Billy realizes he cannot change the past, the present or the future.

Billy is introduced to a Marine major who spoke to the Lions Club. Billy says that his son is a Green Beret. The major says that he should be proud of his son. Billy says he is. Then Billy goes back home to take a nap to help him prevent the fits of quiet weeping that attack him every so often.

He is rich, despite his expectations. His daughter is about to get married. He lies down on the bed, but cannot fall asleep. Instead, he weeps. He hears the doorbell ring and goes downstairs. A crippled man offers to sell him magazines that will never come.

Billy returns to Luxembourg in 1944. He is being marched along with all the other POWs. Roland Weary is in front of him and Roland's feet are pools of blood from the clogs he is wearing. As the prisoners march back, German reserves rush to the front. One of them spits on Roland Weary.

The Americans come to a series of railway cars that will take them deep into Germany. The Germans divide the men into rank and put them into railway cars. A wheezing, dying colonel keeps repeating, "It's me boys! It's Wild Bob!" (66) Then Vonnegut says that he was actually there and so was his friend Bernard V. O'Hare.

Pilgrim and Weary are crammed into separate boxcars. Billy meets an ex-hobo who says that he has been in worse situations that this. Billy looks out of a ventilator. In another car, men are calling out that a man died in there. After a while, the Germans open to door and pull out the corpse of Wild Bob.

The trains begin to pull out in late December. Billy's train does not move for two days. In the meantime, food and water are passed into the cars through the ventilators and excrement is thrown out of the ventilators. The men take turns lying down to sleep. Christmas arrives. Billy returns to 1967 to the night he is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorans.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The major in the Marines is a self-contradictory speaker who is set up to be a symbol of the silliness of the nationalistic, military logic. He says that they must stop the Communists from enforcing their will on weaker countries, but the United States must enforce its will on other countries by bombing them into the Stone Age.

Vonnegut says that he was actually at the railway yard in order to tell the reader that the events he described actually happened -- with the obvious exception of the existence of two people named Billy Pilgrim and Roland Weary.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

It is the night before Barbara's wedding and Billy cannot sleep. Because his wife is asleep, he gets out of bed and goes downstairs to wait for the flying saucer that he knows is coming to kidnap him. Billy comes slightly unstuck in time and watches a war movie backwards. Then it goes forward again. Billy walks outside.

The flying saucer from Tralfamadore arrives. It shoots him with a ray that makes him want to climb the rungs of the ladder it lowers down to him.

The Tralfamadorans ask Billy if he has any questions. He asks, "Why me?" (76) They simply respond that there is no why for him or for them. They are all there because the moment is structured to make them pick him up and carry him to Tralfamadore. They administer an anesthetic to Billy.

Billy falls asleep and wakes up in a boxcar crossing Germany in 1944. He tries to lie down and sleep, but none of the soldiers there want him to sleep near them because Billy kicks, tosses, and whimpers in his sleep. The hobo keeps telling him that things are not that bad. On the ninth day of their journey, the hobo dies.

On the same day, in the boxcar ahead of them, Roland Weary dies from gangrene started in his torn-up feet. Roland Weary has been telling everyone about The Three Musketeers and that it is Billy Pilgrim's fault that he is dying.

The train arrives at the POW camp on the tenth day. It was originally an extermination camp for Russian prisoners. The guards lead the Americans into the camp, giving each American a coat from a prisoner who had died. Billy is the only one to receive a coat from a dead civilian. The prisoners are sent into a delousing station.

Billy is small and weak, as are many other Americans. One of the better bodies belongs to a high school history teacher and tennis coach named Edgar Derby. He will be killed in 68 days for taking a teapot in Dresden. The worst body belongs to Paul Lazzaro, who promised Roland Weary that he would make Billy Pilgrim pay for killing Roland.

As the showers turn on, Billy goes back to infancy and sees his parents cooing over him. Then Billy is an optometrist playing golf on a Sunday. Then Billy is on a flying saucer going to Tralfamadore. Billy asks him where they are and how they got there. The Tralfamadoran tells him that there is no reason, the event simply happened. Billy says that it sound like the Tralfamadoran does not believe in free will. The Tralfamadoran replies that out of all the beings in the universe, only Earthlings speak of free will.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The scene in which Billy watches a movie backwards shows war fixing holes in planes and bringing people back to life, then putting dangerous explosives back into the ground where they will never be seen again. It is a fantasy of how things should be.

Billy in the civilian coat is a symbol of the way that he stands out from the other soldiers. He is not really a soldier; he is just a misplaced, confused person in a military uniform.

The Tralfamadoran view of time is that events merely happen. There is no cause and effect and there is no reason why things happen. Essentially, they see events as fated. They see things coming in the future and know what happened in the past and they know that they are fixed. There is no reason to try to change things because events in the future cannot be changed any more than events in the past.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Tralfamadorans do not see stars as points of light. Instead, they see where all the stars have been and where they are going, like "luminous spaghetti" (87). They see humans as millipedes "with babies' legs on one end and old people's legs on the other" (87).

Billy requests something to read on the flying saucer. The only Earth book they have is *The Valley of the Dolls*. He asks for a Tralfamadoran novel, but he cannot read it. The aliens explain that it is actually just a series of events that, when read simultaneously as a Tralfamadoran can, show the depth and breadth of life.

Billy falls back in time to his family's trip to the Grand Canyon. Billy is afraid of it. When his mother touches him, he wets his pants. Someone asks a ranger how many people kill their selves in the Canyon. He says about three per year.

Billy then goes ahead ten days to his family's stop in Carlsbad Caverns. Billy is afraid again. The guide turns off all the lights to show them total darkness. Instead, Billy sees his father's watch glowing in the dark.

Billy returns to the POW camp. They are clean and their clothes are deloused. Their names are listed in a record of POWs so that they are officially alive. A German beats up an American because he does not like something the American said. Billy is given a dog tag by the Germans with a piece to be broken off if the person dies. Edgar Derby will have his piece broken off when he is executed in Dresden.

The Americans are marched to a barracks where British officers are held. They are singing to the Americans. The Brits continually try to escape, but fail. They have hoarded several tons of extra supplies they received. The Germans like the Brits, so they allow them to keep the extra supplies. The Brits feed the Americans well. The candles they have are made from the fat of Jews and Gypsies killed in the concentration camps.

The Brits put on a play of *Cinderella*. Billy laughs so hard they take him to the hospital. He lies there while Edgar Derby looks after him. Billy dreams he is a giraffe. Then he moves forward to his time as a mental patient in a veterans' hospital in 1948. A former captain named Eliot Rosewater has a bed next to Billy's bed. He introduces Billy to science fiction novels, especially the work of Kilgore Trout.

Billy hides under his sheet every time his mother visits, so she talks to Rosewater. Rosewater agrees with everything that she says just to be nice. He returns to the hospital bed in the POW camp. He remembers seeing the future event when Edgar Derby is shot. One of the British officers comes to check on Billy. The officer is amazed at how young all the Americans are.

Then Billy returns to the veterans' hospital. His fiancée, Valencia Merble, is there. Billy does not want to marry the fat, ugly Valencia, but he proposed anyway. Valencia asks him if he wants anything, like books. He tells her that Rosewater has plenty of books.

One of Rosewater's books, by Kilgore Trout, is the story of an alien who read the Bible and said that the only real lesson from the Bible is not to kill anyone who is well connected. So he rewrote the Bible to make Jesus some poor nobody who God adopts as His son while Jesus is on the cross.

Trout's books have excellent ideas, but they are written terribly. Rosewater does not think Trout has ever been out of the country because all the Earthlings are American. He tells Valencia that nobody knows where he lives because he is almost the only person to have ever heard of him. He actually lives in Ilium, where Billy lives. Billy will meet him later.

Billy goes back to Tralfamadore where he is displayed naked in a zoo. He has been there for six months and is used to the crowds. He cannot escape. He truthfully tells one of the aliens that he is about as happy there as he was Earth.

Billy learns that there are five sexes on Tralfamadore and there are seven on Earth. The sexes on Earth are actually in the fourth dimension, so he does not know that they exist. He does not understand it, but they don't understand the way that he sees time.

He does not understand why the Tralfamadorans are not appalled by the wars and murders on Earth and he tells them that Earth is a danger to the universe. They tell him that they will actually destroy the universe while testing fuel for their flying saucers. He asks why they do not stop it, but they simply tell him that they always destroy the universe and they always will destroy the universe.

Billy asks them why they do not have wars. They say that they do have wars, but they choose to look at the good things instead and that Earthlings should learn from that.

Billy goes to his honeymoon. He has just had sex with Valencia and he and she will have a son with seven parents. She offers to lose weight for him, but Billy tells her that she does not need to. Because he is a time-traveler, he knows their marriage will be "at least bearable all the way." (120) She asks Billy about the war, but Billy is full of secrets. She tries to get more out of Billy, but he does not say much.

Billy goes back to the POW camp. He goes outside to take a pee, but he is stuck on a barbed wire fence. A Russian on the other side of the fence helps him get off the fence. Then Billy pees. He hears people that seem to be in serious trouble. He finds that the food made the American POWs very sick and they are excreting everything they ate.

Billy moves back to his honeymoon, then to the train taking him back to his army unit after his father's funeral.

Back in the POW camp, a Brit carries in Paul Lazzaro. The British officer Lazzaro was trying to steal cigarettes from had broken his arm. The Brits all dislike the Americans. A

German officer working at the camp translates a memo from an American, Howard W. Campbell Jr., who joined the German army. The memo says that Americans are mostly poor, but the poor dislike themselves because they believe they can make money. However, it is very hard to make money, so they hate themselves for reasons beyond their control. Americans dislike any other American who attempts to lead them.

In 1968, Billy is being treated like a child by his daughter. She asks about the heat, but Billy does not notice the furnace is not working. She sends Billy to bed and calls the furnace repairman.

On Tralfamadore, Montana Wildhack is brought in naked and under sedation. She wakes up, sees the aliens and screams. The zookeeper orders a blue tarp to be placed over their glass bowl to prevent anybody from seeing the unpleasantness of Wildhack's terror.

Eventually, Montana begins to trust Billy and love him. She sleeps with him after one week of confinement. In 1968, the furnace repairman tells Billy that everything is fixed. He had a wet dream about Montana Wildhack. The next day, he goes to work at his office. He tells a boy about his adventures on Tralfamadore and the receptionist sends Billy home.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This novel is very similar to the Tralfamadoran novel Vonnegut describes because it is really a collection of moments. The plot is almost an afterthought. Kilgore Trout is Vonnegut's pseudonym for Philip K. Dick. He is considered by most people to have excellent ideas and terrible prose.

The epitaph that Billy thinks of is "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt" (122). With the revelation that the Tralfamadorans have wars just like everybody else, it shows that Vonnegut is not really writing the anti-war book he intended. Instead, it seems that he is simply writing a book with a war in it. Bad things happen, but there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop them.

Once again, Vonnegut points out that he was actually in the POW camp. As the man who thought he was going to literally excrete his brains, he again shows that many of the events of the story really did happen while also showing that he was no war hero.

Since the person who wrote the memo about Americans has the highest I.Q. of all the war criminals, it is seems that we can assume that Vonnegut thinks his words are true. However, it is not entirely clear what Vonnegut thinks about it.

When Barbara tells Billy that she should treat him like a child, he responds, "That isn't what happens next." (131) This foreshadows the fact that Billy is actually living through these time jumps and sees the future just as well as he remembers the past.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Billy wakes up in the POW camp. He feels an "animal magnetism" (136) coming from his coat. He feels something in the pockets, but he does not check them.

The next morning, the Brits are building a new latrine and a new theater to replace the ones that the Americans are using. Some of the Brits walk through the hospital. The officer who broke Lazzaro's arm asks Lazzaro how he is. Lazzaro tells the Brit that he will have him killed after the war. The Brit is unimpressed. Then Lazzaro tells Billy that he is going to have all of his enemies killed after the war, including Billy, who killed his friend Roland Weary.

Billy knows that he dies in 1976. He is leaving a lecture he gave at a packed baseball stadium in Chicago. The United States has been divided into 20 nations for the sake of world peace. Billy does not mind the fact that he is about to die. He laughs about it and has the crowd do the same. The police try to protect him, but he simply tells them to go home to their families. Then Paul Lazzaro shoots Billy in the head with a laser rifle.

In 1945, Billy, Lazzaro and Derby walk back to the theater where the Americans are housed. A Brit is marking a line dividing the American and British sections of the camp. In the theater, Billy sees the silver boots used by the man who played Cinderella. Because he needs new boots, he tries them on and they fit perfectly.

The American POWs have an election to choose a leader and Edgar Derby is elected because nobody else seems to care. A British man tells the Americans that they are going to Dresden that afternoon. It is an open city, so it will not be bombed. The Americans are fed and they keep their food down this time. Billy leaves for Dresden wearing Cinderella's silver boots, a toga made of the piece of the curtain used for the play, and carrying his civilian coat like a muff.

The Americans arrive in Dresden. The city is still unaffected by the war. The Americans walk through the city. A surgeon angrily taunts Billy for being dressed so comically. Billy shows him the diamond that was in his coat. The Americans are marched to their lodgings in Slaughterhouse Five.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Billy Pilgrim fitting into the boots of Cinderella is a symbol of the way that the ugly, dirty, unpromising Billy Pilgrim becomes an important man who is loved and lauded for telling the truth about flying saucers and the way time works. The British man telling the Americans that Dresden will not be bombed foreshadows the already known fact that Dresden will be bombed to utter destruction.

When the POWs arrive in Dresden, Vonnegut says, "Oz." (148) Once again, he is putting himself into the story. The use of the name "Oz" enhances the fantasy elements of the story and gives more weight to Billy Pilgrim in the Cinderella costume.

The diamond and dentures in Billy's pocket are symbolic of his secret knowledge. He does not ask what the objects are until it is time. Then he shows his knowledge to the world and people are amazed because it is both beautiful and useful, like the diamond and the dentures.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Billy Pilgrim gets onto a chartered airplane with several other optometrists. A barbershop quartet on the plane sings some bawdy songs at the request of Billy's father-in-law. Billy takes a momentary trip back to the woods in Luxembourg, then the plane crashes into the side of a mountain. Billy is the only survivor. Two Austrian skiers find him and take him to the hospital.

Billy dreams about Dresden. He dreams about working at a factory that made syrup for pregnant women. Everyone stole spoonfuls of syrup because it tasted good and it was enriched with vitamins and minerals. Billy stole some syrup. Edgar Derby saw him and Billy gave him some too.

Chapter 7 Analysis

After the plane crash, Billy hears the Austrians speaking in German. He says "Schlachthof-fünf," because he was supposed to say that to any German who needed to know where he came from. The plane crash is a symbol of the death of almost everyone in Dresden except the American POWs.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Two days before the bombing of Dresden, Howard J. Campbell Jr. tries to recruit the American POWs to join an American unit of the German army. Nobody joins. Edgar Derby gives Campbell a stirring response to his attempt at recruiting; saying that no decent American would join the Nazis. The next night, Dresden is bombed, killing 130,000 people. Then, Billy's daughter is telling Billy that she could kill Kilgore Trout.

Kilgore Trout lives in a rented basement in Ilium, New York. Billy meets Trout as he is yelling at paperboys to sell the *Ilium Gazette* and attempting to bribe them to do it. As Billy walks up to him, one of the paperboys quits. Then Billy asks Trout if he is the writer Kilgore Trout. Trout never thought that anyone had every heard of him. As he helps Trout deliver the route for the paperboy who quit, Trout tells him that he had only had one fan letter. It was from Eliot Rosewater. Trout thought Eliot was 14 because the letter was so insanely written.

Billy invites Trout to his 18th wedding anniversary. Trout has a good time because everyone is actually interested in him because he is a writer. He lies to a pretty young lady to entertain himself.

Billy is about to give Valencia an expensive ring for their anniversary. However, a barbershop quartet there sings a song that affects Billy badly. He is suddenly ill. Trout says that Billy must have seen through a "time window" (174). Billy denies it and hands Valencia the ring. He walks around the party trying to act normal, but Trout follows Billy around. He believes in time travel and ESP and he wants someone to prove them. The barbershop quartet sings another song and Billy is suddenly ill again. He runs upstairs to the bathroom. His son is sitting on the toilet with a guitar he will never learn to play.

Billy retreats to his room and turns on the vibrating bed. He remembers Dresden. He is in the basement of the slaughterhouse with the other American POWs and four German guards. He is listening to the bombs falling on the city. One of the guards looks outside every so often and tells the other guards that the entire city is burning. They cannot safely come out until the next day.

The city is like a moonscape. The four German guards were like the barbershop quartet at his anniversary party. Billy is in the Tralfamadoran zoo. Montana asks for a story. Billy tells her about the bombing of Dresden.

In Dresden, the guards line the Americans up in ranks of four. They march through the streets and see utter desolation. The stones of the buildings are still hot from the fire. They expect everybody in the city to be dead and any living person seems to be a flaw. American fighter planes look for people moving fire at the POWs and hit some of them.

The Americans go to an inn in Dresden's suburbs that is run by a blind man and his wife. They had not seen another living person on the road. The guards sleep in the inn and the POWs sleep in the stable.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The four guards and the four columns of Americans parallel the barbershop quartet at Billy's anniversary party and the barbershop quartet that was on the plane that crashed.

When Kilgore Trout yells at the paperboys, Vonnegut points out a few of Trout's works that are similar to what Trout is yelling at his employees. This symbolizes the fact that Trout has almost entirely forgotten that he has written several books. He seems to be trying to forget that stage of his life. However, he has not entirely left it behind because he uses subjects and titles from his books and stories as he yells at the paperboys.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Billy is in the hospital after the plane crash. He is unconscious. Valencia, who dearly loves her husband, races to the hospital. She gets into an accident on the way that smashes up the back of her car. However, it is still drivable. She drives it to the hospital and parks. She cries in the car without turning it off. Fumes from the ruined exhaust get into the car and she dies of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Billy is unconscious and does not know anything about this. His roommate is Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord, a seventy-year-old retired Brigadier General who acts as if he is half that age. He is a professor and the official Air Force Historian. His new wife, his fifth, is twenty-three. She comes in to give her Bertrand a stack of books about the United States Army Air Corp in World War II. As Billy talks to himself in his delirium, he scares Mrs. Rumfoord and bores Gen. Rumfoord.

Rumfoord has his wife read him the official statement from Harry Truman about the bombing of Hiroshima. He also receives a book about the bombing of Dresden. Barbara arrives at the hospital, doped up pills that will help her function now that her father is broken and her mother is dead. She tries to talk to Billy.

Billy goes back to 1958 when he is trying to prescribe corrective lenses for a Mongolian idiot. Then he goes to a time when he is sixteen and waiting for a doctor to look at his infected thumb. Billy wakes up in the hospital after the plane crash. His son Robert, the Green Beret, is there and looking very good. He straightened out a very bad life in the army.

Billy misses Valencia's funeral. He seems to be insensible, but his mind is actually assembling letters about his experience on Tralfamadore. Rumfoord thinks that Billy is a vegetable and says that they should let Billy die. He talks about trying to find information about the Dresden raid, but it is hardly mentioned anywhere. He says that people have heard about it and will want to know more. Billy says that he was there in Dresden. Rumfoord thinks he is just echoing things that other people are saying.

Billy returns to Dresden. He and five other Americans are riding in a wagon two days after the end of World War Two. He and the other Americans are out hunting for souvenirs. A husband and wife, both obstetricians, point out that the horses pulling the wagon had bleeding mouths, cracked hooves, and they were very thirsty. The Americans never noticed this.

The two Germans look at Billy, still dressed in the toga, and silver boots. They yell at him about the horses. Billy looks at the horses and cries for the first time in the war.

Billy returns to the hospital. He tells Rumfoord about everything in Dresden, including the Russians arriving and arresting everybody. Then, two days later, he was sent back

to the Americans. Rumfoord says that it had to be done. Billy agrees and says that it was all right because everything is all right.

Barbara takes Billy home. Billy sneaks out and drives to New York City. He goes to a pornography store with Kilgore Trout novels in the front as a cover for their real business. He sees a picture of Montana Wildhack. Another man shows him a copy of the photograph of the woman with the Shetland pony.

Billy gets onto a talk radio show and tells the listeners all about Tralfamadore. He is kicked out of the studio. He goes back to the hotel and travels back to Tralfamadore.

Montana Wildhack tells him that he has been time traveling again. She is nursing their baby. He tells her about his experience in New York. Billy looks at a locket hanging between her breasts. Written on it is the prayer he hung on the wall in his office; it starts with, "God grant me the serenity…" (209)

Chapter 9 Analysis

Rumfoord is a symbol of the military mind that says that killing people is just what people do and the weak deserve to die if they cannot fend for themselves.

The book on the Dresden bombing points out that it killed more people than the firebombing of Tokyo or the atom bombing of Hiroshima. Thus, it simultaneously says that mass slaughter is a bad thing, but it is not limited just to nuclear weapons. People can kill each other very effectively without them. It is inviting people to be resigned to the fact that people kill each other all the time, and nobody can do anything to stop it, because it just happens.

The coffin-shaped wagon the Americans ride it symbolizes the fact that they should be dead men in a dead city. However, they are alive just as the soldiers on exercise in South Carolina were dead, yet alive all at the same time.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Vonnegut tells the reader about people dying and the fact that his father left him several guns after he died. "They rust." (210) Then Vonnegut mentions that Billy Pilgrim says that Tralfamadorans are more interested in Darwin than Jesus because Darwin said that things die because they are meant to die and "corpses are improvements" (210).

Vonnegut says he hopes Billy Pilgrim is right and people never die. Then he reminisces about his trip to East Germany.

Billy Pilgrim returns to 1945 in Dresden. He and the other prisoners are sent into Dresden to sift through the rubble. They open one building and find dozens of bodies that they begin to pull them out. As the bodies began to rot, they cannot manage to do that, so German soldiers just fire flamethrowers into the holes. The Maori man Billy works with dies from throwing up so much. Eventually, the German soldiers leave to fight the Russians and the civilians dig rifle pits around the city. Then the war ends. Billy and some other soldiers find the wagon. A bird sitting on a branch says to Billy, "Poo-tee-weet?"

Chapter 10 Analysis

The final line of the book, a bird singing, is symbolic of the fact that life still goes on, despite the destruction of war. The birds do not care about the things people do to each other. They just go on being birds.

Characters

Billy Pilgrim's father

Billy Pilgrim's father, whose full name is not given, is a barber in Ilium, New York. He dies in a hunting accident while Billy is in military training in South Carolina. Bil1y attends his funeral shortly before being shipped overseas.

Billy Pilgrim's mother

Billy's mother, whose name is not given, survives into old age. Billy visits her in a rest home in 1965.

Wild Bob

Wild Bob is an American prisoner of war who dies en route to Dresden. Shortly before he dies, he gives a speech to imaginary troops encouraging them to continue fighting the Gentians and inviting them to visit him in the United States after the war. His delusions as to his troops and the glories of combat represent the overall absurdity of both war and the attempt to control the uncontrollable.

Howard W. Campbell Jr.

An American who has gone over to the Nazis and works in the Gentian Ministry of Propaganda, Campbell visits the American prisoners in Dresden and tries to convince them to leave the Allies. Campbell is also the main character in Vonnegut's earlier novel *Mother Night.*

Colonel

See Wild Bob

Edgar Derby

Derby is a high school teacher from Indianapolis who becomes the unofficial leader of the American prisoners in Dresden. He is a fundamentally decent man and a natural leader. He is also very kind to Billy Pilgrim. After the firebombing of Dresden, he is caught stealing a teapot and is shot by the Gentians for plundering-a pointless death that underscores the absurdity and tragedy of war.

English colonel

See Head Englishman

Head Englishman

The head of the English prisoners of war is a colonel. He is friendly but slightly condescending to the Americans, who do not share the English prisoners' determination to remain disciplined, organized, and cheerful during their captivity.

Paul Lazzaro

Lazzaro is an American prisoner of war in Dresden who befriends Roland Weary and promises to avenge Weary's death, which Weary blames on Billy. Lazzaro survives the war and hires the assassin who kills Billy in 1976.

Lionel Merble

Lionel Merble is Billy Pilgrim's father-in-law. He sets Billy up in a successful optometry practice. He is killed in a plane crash when he and Billy are travelling to an optometrist's convention; Billy and the copilot are the only survivors. Although not a bad man, Lionel Merble may be seen as representing the callousness and shallow materialism of postwar America.

Bernard V. O'Hare

Bernard is Vonnegut's "old war buddy" with whom Vonnegut witnessed the Dresden firebombing. A real-life person with whom Vonnegut travelled back to Dresden in the 1960s, Bernard makes an appearance at the novel's beginning.

Mary O'Hare

Mary O'Hare is Bernard's wife and another real-life person to appear in the novel. Mary objects to Vonnegut's writing about Dresden, worrying that he might make war seem romantic and glamorous. Vonnegut promises that he will subtitle his book "The Children's Crusade."

Barbara Pilgrim

Barbara is Billy Pilgrim's daughter. It is on the night of her wedding that Billy is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians. After her mother's death, Barbara assumes a

parental role with the increasingly detached Billy and is both impatient with and embarrassed by Billy's stories about the Tralfamadorians.

Billy Pilgrim

At one point in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut writes, "There are almost no characters in this story ... because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces." This description certainly applies to Billy. From his earliest childhood memories of being tossed in the deep end of a pool to learn how to swim, or being dragged against his will on a family vacation to the Grand Canyon, Billy has been at the mercy of "enormous forces." As a soldier captured after the Battle of the Bulge by German soldiers, Billy is pathetically unprepared for the pressures of combat and reacts to the horrific events he witnesses, including the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, with varying degrees of disassociation and withdrawal. It is while he is a prisoner that he first becomes "unstuck in time," finding himself travelling into the past and future with no warning. This time travel is both a literal sciencefiction event and a metaphor for the alienation and dislocation Billy, and contemporary humanity, feel in the face of overwhelming and inexplicable cruelty and violence.

Billy is later kidnapped by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. The aliens' philosophy explicitly rejects the concept of free will. They believe that events cannot be changed by a person's actions. This idea reinforces the theme that Billy, and everyone else, is at the mercy of forces largely beyond our control. In fact, the only active response Billy has during the entire novel is his attempt to publicize his abduction by aliens. It is appropriate that the closest relationship Billy has is not with his wife or family but with Kilgore Trout, a science fiction writer whose novels see through the illusion of logic and control.

After the war, Billy becomes an optometrist, marries, and has two children. His life is mundane, but he continues his time-traveling experiences, which are, like everything else, beyond his power to control. His time spent with the Tralfamadorians helps him to gain a peaceful perspective on life. In the end, Billy comes to accept the fact that he cannot change events, and he devotes life to teaching the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians to the people of Earth.

Robert Pilgrim

Robert is Billy Pilgrim's son. After having "a lot of trouble" in high school, Robert joined the military, became a Green Beret, fought in Vietnam, and "became a fine young man."

Valencia Merble Pilgrim

Valencia is Billy Pilgrim's wife. A wealthy but unattractive woman, she is hopelessly in love with Billy, but Billy never really loves her and sees her as "one of the symptoms of his disease." While Billy is hospitalized after surviving his plane crash, Valencia is killed in a traffic accident while rushing to be with Billy in the hospital-another innocent victim of an absurd and indifferent universe.

Eliot Rosewater

Eliot Rosewater is a friendly eccentric with whom Billy Pilgrim shares a hospital room after Billy's breakdown. Rosewater and Billy "both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war." It is Rosewater who introduces Billy to science fiction, especially the novels of Kilgore Trout. Rosewater is also the title character of Vonnegut's earlier novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.*

Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord

A Harvard professor and official Historian of the U.S. Air Force, Rumfoord shares a hospital room with Billy Pi1grim after Pilgrim's plane crash. Rumfoord is a fervent patriot and an outspoken supporter of the Allied firebombing of Dresden. He is, like Roland Weary, yet another example of the delusional belief in the romance of war and humanity's ability to control the uncontrollable.

Tralfamadorians

The alien race that kidnaps Billy Pilgrim are from the planet Tralfamadore. Although never represented as individuals, the Tralfamadorians provide the philosophy of time and free will that underlies the novel.

Kilgore Trout

Kilgore Trout is a science fiction novelist and Billy Pilgrim's favorite writer. He lives in Illium and supports himself by delivering newspapers. Billy meets Trout for the first time in 1964 and befriends him. Trout represents yet another way of trying to cope with the absurd tragedy of human existence. Some Critics have also seen him as a projection of Vonnegut' s own anxieties about being typecast as a science fiction writer. Both Trout and his novels are mentioned in other Vonnegut novels.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

One of the unusual aspects of *Slaughterhouse Five* is that its author appears as a character in his on novel. Vonnegut appears throughout the first and last chapters, where he discusses his difficulty in writing the novel and his visit back to Dresden some twenty years after his imprisonment there.

Roland Weary

Weary is one of the three other soldiers captured with Billy Pilgrim after the Battle of the Bulge. He is a sadistic bully who despises Billy and whose hobbies include collecting instruments of torture. He imagines that there is great camaraderie between him and

the two scouts with whom he and Billy are lost, but the scouts eventually abandon both Weary and Billy. Weary dies of gangrene on the train to Dresden, blames Billy for his death, and asks other soldiers to avenge him. Weary's aggressively violent nature and delusional belief in the romance of war represent the militarism and hatred that Vonnegut is condemning in the novel.

Montana Wildhack

Montana is a twenty-year-old American movie star who is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians to be a mate for Billy Pilgrim during his captivity. She and Billy have a child while they are being kept by the Tralfamadorians.

Setting

For many years categorized strictly as a writer of science fiction, Vonnegut has a propensity for mixing the ordinary and the otherworldly in his fiction. Structured in "the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore," Slaughterhouse-Five jumps backward and forward in time, and back and forth across the universe in setting. Snippets of events, seemingly unconnected either chronologically or geographically, follow one another; Vonnegut suggests that the cataclysmic devastation of modern warfare has deadened human sensitivity and that modem technology has outstripped the reach of human comprehension. The novel follows Billy Pilgrim, who "has come unstuck in time," to the battlefields of World War II, the slaughterhouses of Dresden, the suburban comforts of Ilium (modeled after Schenectady), and the zoos of distant Tralfamadore. In an age when progress frequently means destruction, the Tralfamadorian concept of time—which, essentially, states that all moments exist and always have existed, all at once— seems the only antidote to a maddening sense of helplessness.

Social Sensitivity

The 1960s produced a string of novels of the absurd that reflect the bleakness of a time when unabated optimism was checked by the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. By the end of the decade, the Vietnam War had reached its height, and the mood of the country had sunk to one of abject pessimism.

Many people believed that society had gone berserk and that a few world leaders exercised control over the destiny of millions. Vonnegut's expressed theme in Slaughterhouse-Five is the madness of war. In his novel he uses the senseless bombing of Dresden as the symbol of such madness, but he has stated that his purpose in writing the novel was to make Americans more aware of the absurdity of the Vietnam War. Vonnegut consciously wanted to avoid writing a novel that glamorized the brutality of war and thus, as the subtitle suggests, portrays war as fought by young and uncomprehending innocents.

Although Slaughterhouse-Five remains an enormously popular novel some two decades after its publication, it has not been without its critics. Some readers are offended by the book's black humor and irreverent attitude, and charge that Vonnegut's view of life is so slanted by his personal experiences that he is incapable of serving as a legitimate social critic. Vonnegut uses vulgar slang, but before condemning Vonnegut's books parents and teachers should note that the vulgarity serves the stylistic purpose of interjecting humor and flippancy into discussions of dark situations.

Literary Qualities

Vonnegut's title page statement that Slaughterhouse-Five is written in a "telegraphic schizophrenic manner" is a fairly accurate description of the novel's stylistic approach. Drawing on the literary devices of "flashback" and "flash-forward," Vonnegut ignores the restrictions of linear time and fixed space to fashion a novel that, despite its sometimes extraterrestrial setting, displays less affinity with science fiction than it does with psychological drama.

Vonnegut, the writer-narrator, moves freely through narrative time, mixing descriptions of historic Dresden and his personal wartime experiences with Tralfamadorian fantasy and characters from his earlier fiction. Playing Tralfamadorian time against sequential Earth time allows Vonnegut to establish the psychic disorder of both Billy and the society that has produced him.

Vonnegut denies being a science fiction writer, and some critics have argued that Slaughterhouse-Five is a novel of "science reality" rather than science fiction. Vonnegut describes a world in which technology has rendered an event such as the annihilation of 135,000 people both possible and almost beneath notice. Although Slaughterhouse-Five does not fit neatly into any one genre, it stakes a place for itself in the literary canon with a combination of startling originality and thought-provoking literary allusion. Billy Pilgrim's name implies a connection to John Bunyan's seventeenth-century allegory, Pilgrim's Progress. Like Bunyan's Christian explorer, Billy is exposed to the evils of the world, but unlike Bunyan's pilgrim, Billy is not supported by the vision of a Celestial City at the end of the journey. Instead, he envisions the moment of his own death. Vonnegut's adaptation of this famous Christian allegory, combined with his ironic references to the ill-fated Children's Crusade, clearly indicates his belief that modern religion has failed humankind.

As for the novel's protagonist, it is unclear whether Billy has really become "unstuck in time," or whether, like so many madmen in literature before him, he has merely denied reality and has thereby released himself from the horrors of his world.

Thematic Overview

Slaughterhouse-Five describes man's inhumanity to man, and the mass destruction of Dresden by Allied forces serves as Vonnegut's primary example.

Although a humanist at heart, Vonnegut repeatedly demonstrates the human aptitude for cruelty, and he shows how technology magnifies this cruelty beyond human control.

At a deeper level the novel explores the moral vacuum in which contemporary human life exists. Vonnegut's outrage over Dresden was as much a result of the lack of attention given to this event as it was to the bloodshed, but there are no villains in Vonnegut's novels, and he fully recognizes the ambiguous connection between agent and victim. Thus, in one of the novel's many Biblical allusions he sympathizes with Lot's wife who looks back at the destruction she is escaping before being turned to stone.

Slaughterhouse-Five, which is about Vonnegut's effort to tell his story as much as it is about Billy Pilgrim, explores the ambiguous nature of communication, a recurrent theme in his work. In Mother Night (1961), Howard Campbell's Nazi propaganda broadcasts are also strategically coded messages to the Allies, messages that even he does not understand. In the end it is uncertain whether his strategic assistance to the Allies has outweighed the moral support his broadcasts gave the Nazi regime. Accordingly, Vonnegut approached the narration of his war experiences cautiously, fearful that by retelling his adventures he would inadvertently glamorize war. The result is a mix of historical and fantastic perspectives that discourages suspension of disbelief.

Finally, the novel explores the irreconcilable conflict between free will and determinism. Billy Pilgrim's motto — "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" — is undercut by the narrator's comment that "among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." The book accepts the logic of Tralfamadorian determinism, but it is nevertheless clear that Vonnegut cannot excuse the fire-bombing of Dresden as fated, and although Billy Pilgrim escapes into the Tralfamadorian belief that the perpetual existence of all moments of time eliminates the negation of death, he still finds himself at times inexplicably shedding tears.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Alienation may be defined as, among other things, an inability to make connections with other individuals and with society as a whole. In this sense, Billy Pilgrim is a profoundly alienated individual. He is unable to connect in a literal sense, as his being "unstuck in time" prevents him from building the continuous set of experiences which form a person's relationships with others. While Billy's situation is literal in the sense of being a science fiction device-he is "literally" travelling through time-It also serves as a metaphor for the sense of alienation and dislocation which follows the experience of catastrophic violence (World War II). This violence is, for Vonnegut and many other modern writers, a fact of life for humanity in the twentieth century. It is appropriate that what is arguably the closest relationship Billy has in the novel is with the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, another deeply alienated individual: "he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war."

Free Will

One of the most important themes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that of free will, or, more precisely, its absence. This concept is articulated through the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians, for whom time is not a linear progression of events, but a constant condition: "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist." All beings exist in each moment of time like "bugs in amber," a fact that nothing can alter. "Only on Earth is there any talk of free will." What happens, happens. "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." Accordingly, the Tralfamadorians advise Billy "to concentrate on the happy moments of life, and to ignore the unhappy ones."

Apathy and Passivity

Apathy and passivity are natural responses to the idea that events are beyond our control.

Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* Billy Pilgrim does not act so much as he is acted upon. If he is not captured by the Germans, he is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians. Only later in life, when Billy tries to tell the world about his abduction by the Tralfamadorians, does he initiate action, and even that may be seen as a kind of response to his predetermined fate. Other characters may try to varying degrees to initiate actions, but seldom to any avail. As Vonnegut notes in Chapter Eight, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces."

Death

Given the absence of free will and the inevitability of events, there is little reason to be overly concerned about death. The Tralfamadorian response to death is, "So it goes," and Vonnegut repeats this phrase at every point in the novel where someone, or something, dies. Billy Pilgrim, in his travels through time, "has seen his own death many times" and is unconcerned because he knows he will always exist in the past.

Patriotism

The world as depicted in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a world in which patriotism twists into nationalism and militarism and becomes an excuse for acts of violence and mass destruction. Those who claim to be patriots, such as "Wild Bob," the American prisoner of war who gives speeches to imaginary troops, or Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord, an Air Force historian who defends the Dresden raid, are deluded at best and malevolent at worst. More realistic is the reaction of the German soldiers in Dresden to the American prisoners: "There was nothing to be afraid of. Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves."

War and Peace

Slaughterhouse-Five deals with many different themes, but it is most of all a novel about the horrors of war. For Vonnegut, war is not an enterprise of glory and heroism, but an uncontrolled catastrophe for all involved, and anyone who seeks glory and heroism in war is deluded. Although World War II is regarded by most as a justified conflict which defeated the genocidal regime of Nazi Germany, Vonnegut sees only victims on all sides, from the American soldier executed by the Germans for looting to the 135,000 German civilians killed in the Allied firebombing of Dresden. The horrors of the war are so overwhelming that Vonnegut doubts his ability to write about them. Speaking directly in the first chapter, he says of the novel, "It is so short and jumbled and jangled... because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." The only response to the nightmare of war is a profound alienation and distancing, made literal by Billy Pilgrim's being "unstuck in time." Appropriately, Billy's condition offers the most striking Image of peace in the novel, as he becomes unstuck in time while watching a war movie on television and sees it backwards:

The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. . The steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. . [which] were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again

Science and Technology

Although *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not deal as directly with issues of science and technology as do other Vonnegut novels such as *Player Piano* and *Cat's Cradle,* the limitations of technology remain an Important theme. The destruction of World War II would not have been possible without "advances" in technology (the long-range bombers that destroyed Dresden; the poison gas used on concentration camp inmates). And the extraordinarily advanced technology of the Tralfamadorians not only cannot prevent the end of the Universe, but actually causes it: "We [Tralfamadorians] blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers."

Style

Structure

Perhaps the most notable aspect of *Slaughterhouse-Five's* technique is its unusual structure. The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, has come "unstuck in time"; at any point in his life, he may find himself suddenly at another point in his past or future. Billy's time travel begins early on during the major experience of his life-his capture by German soldiers during World War II and subsequent witnessing of the Allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany. Both the centrality of this event and its radically alienating effect on the rest of Billy's life are represented by the novel's structure. Billy's experiences as a prisoner of war are told in more or less chronological order, but these events are continually interrupted by Billy's travels to various other times in his life, both past and future. In this way, the novel's structure highlights both the centrality of Billy's war experiences to his life, as well as the profound dislocation and alienation he feels after the war.

Point of View

Another unusual aspect of *Slaughterhouse Five* is its use of point of view. Rather than employing a conventional third-person "narrative voice," the novel is narrated by the author himself. The first chapter consists of Vonnegut discussing the difficulties he had in writing the novel, and Vonnegut himself appears onstage as a character several times later in the novel. Instead of obscuring the autobiographical elements of the novel, Vonnegut makes them explicit; instead of presenting his novel as a self-contained creative work, he makes it clear that it is an imperfect and incomplete attempt to come to terms with an overwhelming event. In a sentence directed to his publisher, Vonnegut says of the novel, "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre."

Symbolism

Slaughterhouse-Five is, among other things, a work of Science fiction. As such, both Billy Pilgrim's travels through time and his abduction by aliens are presented as literal events. However, as in the best science fiction, these literal events also have symbolic significance Billy's being "unstuck in time" is both a literal event and a metaphor for the sense of profound dislocation and alienation felt by the survivors of war, while the aliens from the planet Tralfamadore provide a vehicle for Vonnegut's speculations on fate and free will.

Style

Style-the way an author arranges his or her words, sentences, and paragraphs into prose--is one of the most difficult aspects of literature to analyze. However, it should be noted that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is written in a very distinctive style. In describing overwhelming, horrible, and often inexplicable events, Vonnegut deliberately uses a very simple, straightforward prose style. He often describes complex events in the language one might use to explain something to a child, as in this description of Billy Pilgrim being marched to a German prison camp:

A motion picture camera was set up at the border to record the fabulous victory. Two civilians in bearskin coats were leaning on the camera when Billy and Weary came by They had run out of film hours ago.
One of them singled out Billy's face for a moment, then focused at infinity again. There was a tiny plume of smoke at infinity. There was a battle there People were dying there. So it goes.

In writing this way, Vonnegut forces the reader to confront the fundamental horror and absurdity of war head-on, with no embellishments, as if his readers were seeing it clearly for the first time.

Black Humor

Black humor refers to an author's deliberate use of humor in describing what would ordinarily be considered a situation too violent, grim, or tragic to laugh at. In so doing, the author is able to convey not merely the tragedy, but also the absurdity, of an event Vonnegut uses black humor throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five,* both in small details (the description of the half-crazed Billy Pilgrim, after the Battle of the Bulge, as a "filthy flamingo") and in larger plot elements (Billy's attempts to publicize his encounters with the Tralfamadorians), to reinforce the idea that the horrors of war are not only tragic, but inexplicable and absurd.

Historical Context

The Firebombing of Dresden

The most important historical event which informs *Slaughterhouse-Five* took place almost a quarter of a century before the novel was published. On February 13 and 14, 1945, allied aircraft dropped incendiary bombs on the German city of Dresden-a so-called "open city" with no significant military targets. The bombing raid created a firestorm that destroyed the city and killed an estimated 135,000 people, almost all of them civilians. This was nearly twice the number of people killed by the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The Dresden bombing remains the single heaviest air strike in military history. The raid remains controversial to this day, as many historians have suggested that the raid served no real military purpose and did nothing to hasten Germany's defeat. Approximately one hundred American prisoners of war, captured at the Battle of the Bulge, were in Dresden during the bombing. Vonnegut was one of them.

The Vietnam War

The war between communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam began in 1954 and ended in 1975 with a North Vietnamese victory and the reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. This same time period also covered most of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, a political conflict which led to the United States entering the Vietnam War on the side of South Vietnam. The year before Vonnegut's novel was published, 1968, saw the American presence in Vietnam peak at 543,000 troops. As American involvement increased, so did opposition to the war among Americans. By 1969, a sitting President, Lyndon Johnson, had chosen not to run for reelection because of his role in prosecuting the war. Also, antiwar sentiment had taken the form of mass demonstrations and the migration of thousands of young American men to Canada, Sweden, and other countries in order to avoid the draft.

Although Vonnegut's novel is centered on events which took place in the 1940s during World War n, it is very much a product of the Vietnam era. Vonnegut even makes direct references to Vietnam in Chapter Three, when Billy Pilgrim, in 1967, listens to a speech by a Marine urging increased bombing of North Vietnam. And in Chapter Ten Vonnegut refers to the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy while observing that "every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam." It is perhaps no surprise that a novel which faced head-on the horrors of war, as well as American responsibility for some of those horrors, struck a chord with the reading public at a time when many Americans were beginning to think their country had made a terrible mistake.

The UFO Phenomenon

An important element of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Billy Pilgrim's abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. In the 1990s, "alien abduction" has become a well-recognized cultural myth, as countless individuals claim to have been abducted by aliens from outer space. Public speculation about UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) and the possibility of life on other planets is at an all-time high, fueled by both popular entertainment (television shows such as *Star Trek* and *The X Files,* movies such as *E.T.* and *Independence Day),* scientific discoveries (the identification of planets outside our solar system), and news events (the Heaven's Gate mass suicides of 1997).

Although Vonnegut's novel predates the cur rent wave of popular awareness of UFOs, the phenomenon was already well-documented when *Slaughterhouse-Five* appeared in 1969. Beginning in 1947, reports of UFOs came in waves from all over the world. Between 1965 and 1967, the U.S.

Air Force received almost three thousand reports of UFO sightings. In 1966, there was even a congressional hearing on the subject, and the Air Force appointed scientist Edward U. Condon to investigate the matter. Condon's conclusion-that there was "no direct evidence whatever" that UFOs were in fact extraterrestrial spacecraft-was the subject of great controversy.

Science Fiction

Slaughterhouse-Five is, among other things, a science fiction novel, and It is also a novel with a strong awareness of the history of science fiction. Vonnegut began his writing career labeled as a Science fiction writer, a classification he never fully escaped until the 1960s. In its use of the alien Tralfamadorians, his novel shows a keen awareness of the staples of both written "pulp" science fiction of the 1930s and 1940s and the popular movies of the 1950s. The character of Kilgore Trout is especially interesting in this regard. Some critics have seen Trout-a visionary writer doomed to poverty and obscurity because of his work in a literary genre considered to be inferior to "real" literature-as a projection of Vonnegut's own fears of how he might have wound up if he had not escaped the "science fiction" label. Others have suggested that Trout is modeled on actual science fiction writers of the 1950s, especially Philip K. Dick and Theodore Sturgeon.

Critical Overview

There is a substantial body of criticism on Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s work in general, and on *Slaughterhouse-Five* in particular. While critics have often found Vonnegut's fiction as a whole to be uneven in quality, they have frequently praised him for *Slaughterhouse-Five,* which is widely regarded as the author's finest work.

The tone for much of the criticism that followed the book's release was set by Robert Scholes in his review of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* which appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* shortly after the novel's publication in 1969. Scholes praised Vonnegut's humor, noting that it "does not disguise the awful things perceived; it merely strengthens and comforts us to the point where such perception is bearable." He asserted that the absurd elements of the novel are appropriate and necessary to deal with the absurdity of the world. He considered the novel to be "an extraordinary success... a book we need to read, and to reread... funny, compassionate, and wise."_ The noted critic Granville Hicks, reviewing the novel in *Saturday Review,* compared Vonnegut to Mark Twain as both a humorist and moralist.

Much of the later criticism of *Slaughterhouse Five* has emphasized the book's unusual and innovative structure. In *Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels* (1977), Richard Giannone observed that "Vonnegut the witness draws moral force by undermining conventional narrative authority" and "comments on the reality of Dresden by treating the problems of fiction.'" In his 1990 study *"Slaughterhouse-Five": Reforming the Novel and the World,* Jerome Klinkowitz observed that the Tralfamadorian concept of time is also "the overthrow of nearly every Aristotelian convention that has contributed to the novel's form in English over the past three centuries.'" And in an earlier study of Vonnegut, Klinkowitz links the author's experiments with narrative form to those of other experimental writers of the 1960s, such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon.

Several critics have also focused on *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a work of science fiction Reviewing the novel in the *New Republic,* J. Michael Crichton compared it to works by such well-known science fiction authors as Robert A. Heinlein, J. G. Ballard, and Roger Zelazny, all of whom were, like Vonnegut, popular among the youth "counterculture" of the 1960s. James Lundquist spent a chapter of his 1977 study of Vonnegut examining Vonnegut's connections to science fiction, noting especially the character of science fiction novelist Kilgore Trout. Interestingly, critics from within the science fiction field are frequently uncomfortable with Vonnegut' s use of science fiction devices. Thomas D. Clareson, writing in *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction,* agreed with noted British science fiction novelist and critic Brian W. Aldiss that Vonnegut's use of time travel and other science fiction devices is "intrusive.'"

While the critical reception of *Slaughterhouse Five* has been overwhelmingly positive, some critics have expressed reservations concerning the novel's apparent endorsement of passive acceptance as an appropriate response to evil. Crichton suggested that Vonnegut "refuses to say who is wrong... ascribes no blame, sets no penalties.'" And

Tony Tanner, in his 1971 book *City of Words,* worried that Vonnegut' s vision is one of "moral indifference.'" The overwhelming popular success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* has also been somewhat tempered by the fact that it is one of the novels most frequently banned from high school classrooms. This is presumably because of its unsparing violence and occasionally explicit language. Nonetheless, Vonnegut's novel has maintained a level of popular and critical success seldom achieved by any book. Most readers and critics have agreed with Tanner, who, despite his concerns about "moral indifference," concluded that Vonnegut's most famous work is "a masterly novel" of "clarity and economy-and compassion."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

F. Brett Cox is an assistant professor of English at Gordon College in Barnesville, Georgia In the following essay, Cox explains how Slaughterhouse-Five *represents Vonnegut's efforts to come to terms with his personal war experiences. Other aspects of the novel are of secondary concern when compared to Vonnegut's anti-war theme.*

In 1969, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., had already published five novels and two short story collections, but he was not especially well known or commercially successful. The publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in that year was an artistic and commercial breakthrough for Vonnegut. According to the critic Jerome Klinkowitz, one of the leading authorities on Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was Vonnegut's "first bestseller. [It] catapulted him to sudden national fame, and brought his writing into serious intellectual esteem." Other critics have noted the novel as a summation of many of the themes of Vonnegut's work: the dangers of unchecked technology, the limitations of human action in a seemingly random and meaningless universe, and the need for people, adrift in an indifferent world, to treat one another with kindness and decency. Almost thirty years later, *Slaughterhouse Five* remains Vonnegut's most discussed and widely admired novel.

Many critics and scholars have suggested that Vonnegut's breakthrough in *Slaughterhouse-Five* occurred because here, for the first time, he addressed directly the pivotal event of his own life. While serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans and, while a prisoner of war, witnessed the firebombing of the German city of Dresden-an "open city" with no significant military targets. On the night of February 13, 1945, Allied bombers dropped incendiary bombs on Dresden, creating a firestorm that destroyed the city and killed an estimated 135,000 people, almost all of them civilians. This was nearly twice the number of people killed by the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The Dresden bombing remains the single heaviest air strike in military history.

Vonnegut' s effort to come to terms with such an overwhelming-and, in the view of many historians, unnecessary-catastrophe took the form of a novel with a highly unusual structure. Rather than employing a conventional third-person "narrative voice," *Slaughterhouse-Five* is narrated by the author himself. The first chapter consists of Vonnegut discussing the difficulties he had in writing the novel, and Vonnegut himself appears onstage as a character several times later in the book. In a sentence directed to his publisher, Vonnegut said of the novel, "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre."

The novel's "short and jumbled and jangled" structure reflects the condition of its protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Like Vonnegut, Billy is taken prisoner by the Germans and witnesses the Dresden firebombing. Billy's response, however, is not to write a novel but to become "unstuck in time." Beginning during this captivity behind German lines, Pilgrim finds himself liable at any time, suddenly and without warning, to travel to any given moment in his own past or future. Although the novel follows Billy's war

experiences in more or less chronological order, a scene of Billy in a German prison camp may be followed immediately by a scene of his wedding night, or a time when his father taught him to swim as a child.

Billy's condition is, on one level, a symbol of the shock, confusion, dislocation, and desire for escape that result from the horrible experiences of war. His time travels could, perhaps, be interpreted as the delusions of an emotionally unstable man. It is important to remember, however, that several of Vonnegut's earlier novels, such as *Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan,* and *Cat's Cradle,* were science fiction novels. Billy's time travel may be symbolic, but it may also be interpreted as an actual event, an example of science fiction's ability to make metaphors concrete.

The most overtly science-fictional element in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, of course, Billy's abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore on his daughter's wedding night many years after the war. In using an alien civilization as a vehicle for commenting on humanity, Vonnegut is again using the traditions of science fiction. The Tralfamadorians also appear in Vonnegut' s *The Sirens of Titan.* During his captivity on Tralfamadore-where he is displayed naked in a cage and, eventually, mated with a movie actress from Earth named Montana Wildhack-Billy learns of the aliens' philosophy of time and death. It is a philosophy that explains his own condition.

For Tralfamadorians, time is not a linear progression of events, but a constant condition. "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist." Like Billy, the aliens can travel back and forth to different moments in time. They do not consider death a significant event, since when a person dies he or she "is still very much alive in the past." Billy does, in fact, know when he is going to die, and is unconcerned. At the moment of his death, he finds himself returning to an earlier point in his life. The Tralfamadorian response to death is "So it goes" a phrase Vonnegut writes at every point in the novel where death is mentioned. All beings exist in each moment of time like "bugs in amber," and there is nothing that can alter that fact: "Only on Earth is there any talk of free will." Accordingly, the Tralfamadorians advise Billy "to concentrate on the happy moments of life, and to ignore the unhappy ones."

Such a philosophy can, of course, lead to being passive and resigned rather than trying to oppose evil and make the world better. Some critics have noted this tension in the novel and worried that it could be read not as moral outrage but as, in the words of the critic Tony Tanner, "culpable moral indifference." A possible answer to this charge may be found in one of Vonnegut' s direct comments to his readers: "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces." There are certainly characters and dramatic situations in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* but the characters are fragile, wounded people at the-mercy of forces completely beyond their control.

Those characters who claim to have some degree of control are, almost without exception, clueless, or cruel, or both. Roland Weary, the soldier who torments Billy while they wander behind enemy lines, believes he is a great warrior. Along with the two

scouts with whom he and Billy find themselves, he considers himself one of "The Three Musketeers," a closely-bound fighting unit. In fact, Weary is a sadistic, incompetent bully whom the experienced scouts abandon. "Wild Bob," a colonel on the prison train with Billy, delivers a speech in which he assures his nonexistent troops that they have the Germans on the run and invites the troops to a reunion in his hometown after the war: "If you're ever in Cody, Wyomning, just ask for Wild Bob!" Shortly thereafter, "Wild Bob" dies of pneumonia. The British prisoners of war, who make a great show of thriving in adverse conditions, owe their prosperity to a clerical error which causes the Red Cross to send them extra supplies. Years after the war, Billy shares a hospital room with Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord, an Air Force historian who has no patience with "bleeding hearts" and tries to convince Billy that the Dresden raid was justified. Billy responds by quoting another person with delusions of control: "'If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming,' said Billy Pilgrim behind his white linen screens, 'just ask for Wild Bob.' " Confronted by the inexplicable horrors of war, and by a world in which people like Weary and Wild Bob and Rumfoord find glory in wholesale death and destruction, Billy's passivity is, perhaps, understandable.

Slaughterhouse-Five is, then, not an answer to the tragedy of war, but a response. The novel's innovative structure, distinctive prose style, and skilled use of humor and satire have all been much commented upon by critics. But it is the horror of war, as represented by the Dresden firebombing, and the attempts of decent people to come to terms with those horrors, that lie at the heart of the book and provide its most memorable scenes. One such scene is when the American POW's emerge from the meat locker under Slaughterhouse-Five to see the charred wreckage left after the bombing:

... the survivors, If they were going to continue to survive, were going to have to climb over curve after curve on the face of the moon The curves were smooth only when seen from a distance The people climbing them learned that they were treacherous, Jagged things Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead There were to be no moon men at all.

Slaughterhouse-Five was published during the height of the Vietnam War, a point in history when many Americans were beginning to think their country had made a terrible mistake. It is perhaps no surprise that a novel which faced head-on the horrors of war (and American responsibility for some of those horrors), while at the same time suggesting that the only proper response to these horrors was to maintain a degree of ironic distance while being kind to victims, struck such a chord with the reading public and made its author a cultural icon. That Vonnegut's novel has remained a classroom staple is a tribute to both its artistic achievement and the power of its message. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, in the words of Tony Tanner, "a masterly novel" of "clarity and economy-and compassion."

Source: F. Brett Cox, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Harris examines the author-as-character, and the distancing and buffers set up by Vonnegut as self-protection.

Carefully read, Chapter One [of *Slaughterhouse-Five]* emerges as a functional and illuminating part of the novel as a whole. For the chapter contains passages that suggest three important facts crucial to a proper understanding of Vonnegut's novel: (1) the novel is less about Dresden than about the psychological impact of time, death, and uncertainty on its main character; (2) the novel's main character is not Billy Pilgrim, but Vonnegut; and (3) the novel is not a conventional anti-war novel at all, but an experimental novel of considerable complexity.

Billy Pilgrim, the putative protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* does not even appear in this chapter. Instead, the focus is on Vonnegut, the author-as-character. Emerging is a portrait of the artist as an aging man, "an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown." He is a man of nostalgia who makes late-night drunken phone calls to almost-forgotten acquaintances, calls that seldom make connection. He reminisces about his days as a university student and police reporter in Chicago, as a public relations man in Schenectady, and as a soldier in Germany. The wartime memories, particularly as they concern the mass deaths at Dresden, especially haunt his reveries and of course form the basis of plot for the subsequent nine chapters.

Yet for one *so* apparently obsessed with the fleeting nature of time-he even quotes Horace *to* that effect-Vonnegut seems at times curiously vague and indefinite about time. He cannot remember the exact year he visited O'Hare and, upon returning *to* bed after a night of drinking and telephoning, cannot tell his wife, who "always has *to* know the time," what time it is. "Search me," he answers. His forgetfulness seems a shield, a defense against a medium that oppresses him.

The Vonnegut of Chapter One appears simultaneously obsessed with and oppressed by time, the past, and death-particularly death. His preoccupation with death is reflected in the various figures he employs in Chapter One and throughout the novel. Among the *most* prominent of these is the flowing-frozen water metaphor. Vonnegut has used this motif before, especially in Cat's *Cradle,* when ice-nine, dropped accidentally into the ocean, ossifies everything liquid. But it recurs in a subtler though perhaps more pervasive way in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Early in the novel, Vonnegut, on his way *to* visit Bernard V. O'Hare in Philadelphia, crosses the Delaware, then appropriates the river as a metaphor in his reflections upon the nature of time. "And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much of it was mine *to* keep." Even before this association of time and the river, however, Vonnegut associates death with ice, frozen water. "Even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers," he writes, "there would still be plain old death." Extending this metaphor throughout the novel, Vonnegut repeatedly portrays living humanity as water flowing, dead humanity as water frozen. "They were moving like water," he describes a procession of Allied POW's, "... and they flowed at last *to* a main highway on a valley's floor. Through the valley flowed a

Mississippi of humiliated Americans." One of the POW's, a hobo, is dead, therefore "could not flow, could not plop. He wasn't liquid anymore." Later, Billy Pilgrim sees the dead hobo "frozen stiff in the weeds beside the track," his bare feet "blue and ivory," the color of ice. The phrase "blue and ivory" occurs seven times in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* twice *to* describe the frozen feet of corpses, five times *to* describe the feet of Billy Pilgrim, who, though still in the land of the flowing, is marked as mortal.

A similar figure applies *to* Vonnegut himself. Twice in Chapter One he refers *to* his breath as smelling of "mustard gas and roses." The phrase appears again in Chapter Four when Billy Pilgrim receives a misdialed phone call *from* a drunk whose breath, like the drunken "telephoner" of Chapter One, smells of mustard gas and roses. The full Im-plication of the image becomes clear only on the next-to-the-last page of the novel In the "corpse mines" of Dresden, as the dead bodies begin *to* rot and liquefy, "the stink (is) like roses and mustard gas." Like Billy Pilgrim's "blue and ivory" feet, Vonnegut's breath marks him as mortal. This, the image suggests, is what time does *to* us all, not only when we lie dead like the Dresden corpses, but while we breathe. Life is a state of gradual but perpetual decay.

Time, then, is the enemy harrowing the brow of the first character we meet in the novel. It is important *to* recognize that the Vonnegut of Chapter One is, indeed, a *character* in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Of course he is very much like Vonnegut the author, has the same experiences, but he remains nonetheless the author-as-character. Moreover, he becomes the first-person narrator for the remainder of the novel, a fact obscured by the Billy Pilgrim plot, which is often read as the novel proper rather than the novel-within-the-novel-proper. Vonnegut-as-character introduces himself in Chapter One, informs us of his procedures in gathering materials for his novel, and confesses the difficulties he has had over the past twenty-three years in writing his story. Then, starting with Chapter Two, he begins narrating his novel, that is, the novel by the author-as-character *within* the novel by Vonnegut the author.

It is not until the Tenth and final chapter that Vonnegut-as-character again "appears." He has not changed much since Chapter One. He again remembers conversations with O'Hare, he is still confused about time, placing the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King only a month apart; and he still harbors thoughts of death. The *most* significant aspect of this chapter, however, is that in describing the Dresden "corpse mines" the narrator shifts for the first time in the novel *to* first person *plural:*

Now Billy and the resi were being marched into the rums by their guards I was there O'Hare was there. *We* had spent the past two nights in the blind innkeeper's stable. Authorities had found *us* there.

They told *us* what to do *We* were to borrow picks and shovels and crowbars and wheelbarrows from our neighbors. *We* were to march with these implements to such and such a place in the rums, ready to go to work. (italics added)

The shift in number insists, however subtly, that the story just related is not merely Billy Pilgrim's story, but the *narrator's* as well. He, too, had suffered capture and malnutrition and the devastating firebombing. He, too, worked in the corpse mines and saw a friend shot for "plundering" a teapot from the rums.

And so, we realize, did Vonnegut the author. Indeed, many autobiographical similarities linking Billy Pilgrim to his "creator," Vonnegut-as-character, extend even more to Vonnegut himself. Both Pilgrim and Vonnegut were born in 1922, had fathers who hunted, are tall; both were captured in Luxembourg during the Battle of the Bulge, were sent to Dresden, where they stayed in *Schlachthoffunf,* worked in a plant that manufactured malt syrup for pregnant women; both survived the Dresden holocaust and helped dig up the corpses afterwards; both were discharged in 1945, returned to college, and were married soon afterwards. Billy thus becomes a dual persona, a mask not only for Vonnegut-as-character (who is already a mask of sorts for Vonnegut), but for Vonnegut the author as well. Vonnegut has thus removed himself at least twice from the painful Dresden experience. By including himself as a character in his own novel, he achieves the distance that must exist between author and first person narrator, no matter how autobiographically based that narrator is. The further inclusion of Billy Pilgrim as protagonist of the novel-within-the-novel removes Vonnegut yet another step from the scenes he is recreating.

Nowhere is this need for distance more evident than when Vonnegut relates the actual firebombing itself. Since this scene constitutes the novel's *raison d'etre,* one might expect an extended and graphic presentation. The scene, however, is not only brief, but is couched in indirection, layered with multiple perspectives. At least one reviewer has criticized the scene's failure to describe more fully the Dresden catastrophe. But Vonnegut did not *see* the firebombing, he heard it, from within *Slaughterhouse-Five.* So does Billy Pilgrim.

He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked. A guard would go to the head of the stairs every so often to see what it was like outside, then he would come down and whisper to the other guards There was fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame
The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn.

Most significant about tins scene is not its indirection, however, but the fact that it is a *remembered* scene. For the first time in the novel, Billy Pilgrim *remembers* a past event rather than time-traveling to it. Time-travel, it seems, would have made the event too immediate, too painful. Memory, on the other hand, supplies a twenty-year buffer. But if the firebombing, only indirectly witnessed, was distressing, the totally devastated City confronted the following day by the one hundred prisoners and their four guards must have been almost overwhelming. To relate that scene Vonnegut-as-narrator requires even more distance than memory can provide. So the scene is revealed through a story Billy remembers having told Montana Wildhack on Tralfamadore Vonnegut-as-character removes himself as much as possible from the scene he narrates, cushioning it with multiple perspectives, constructing what is finally a story within a memory within a novel.

(Vonnegut the author removes himself yet one step further, achieving a story within a memory within a novel within a novel.) Moreover, before relating this important scene, Vonnegut-as-narrator withdraws to the protective fantasy of Tralfamadore. Only from the perspective of that timeless planet can he at last come to artistic terms with a scene that has haunted him for twenty-three years.

Source: Charles B. Harris, "Time, Uncertainity, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five,"* in Centennial Review, Summer, 1976, pp. 228-43.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Vanderwerken discusses Billy Pilgrim, focusing on the causes of his breakdown and how he is influenced by Tralfamadorianism.

The reader's central problem in comprehending Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* lies in correctly understanding the source of Billy Pilgrim's madness. Vonnegut continually undercuts our willing suspension of disbelief in Billy's time travel by offering multiple choices for the origin of Billy's imbalance: childhood traumas, brain damage from his plane crash, dreams, his shattering war experiences, and plain old fantasy. Yet if, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed, only a "first-rate intelligence" has the "ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function," an inquiry into the two opposed philosophical systems that Pilgrim holds in his mind-Tralfamadorianism and Christianity-may lead us to the fundamental cause of Billy's break down. Clearly, Billy is no "first-rate intelligence," and he hardly can be said to "function"; he simply cracks under the strain of his dilemma. For some critics, however, Vonnegut's method of juxtaposing two explanatory systems, seemingly without affirming one or the other, becomes a major flaw in the novel I would argue that, on the contrary, Vonnegut' s position is clear; he rejects both Tralfamadorianism and divinely oriented Christianity, while unambiguously affirming a humanly centered Christianity in which Jesus is a "nobody," a "bum," a man.

In the autobiographical first chapter, Vonnegut introduces the opposed ideas, which the narrative proper will develop, evolving from his twenty-three-year attempt to come to terms with the horror of Dresden. The Christmas card sent to Vonnegut's war buddy by a German cab driver, expressing his hope for a "world of peace and freedom ... if the accident will," dramatizes, in miniature form, a central tension in the novel. Human history is either divinely planned-Christmas signifies God's entrance into human history-and historical events are meaningful, or human history is a series of random events, non-causal, pure "accident," having no ultimate meaning as the Tralfamadorians chum. Both viewpoints deny free will; man is powerless to shape events Either position allows one serenely to wash his hands of Dresden. Billy Pilgrim washes his hands, so to speak, and becomes reconciled to his Dresden experience under the tutelage of the Tralfamadorians: "'[Dresden] was all right,' said Billy. *'Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore.'"

The Tralfamadorians provide Billy with the concept of nonlinear time, which becomes the foundation for a mode of living: "'I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is.* Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber.'" Although men on earth are always" 'explaining why this event is structured as It is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided,'" Billy learns that" 'there is no *why.'"*

In short, Tralfamadorianism is an argument for determinism. Yet, this is a determinism without design, where chance rules. The universe will be destroyed accidentally by the

Tralfamadorians, and wars on earth are inevitable The upshot of the Tralfamadorian philosophy finds expression in a cliché: "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt."

When Billy, full of revelations, returns to Earth "to comfort so many people with the truth about time," the Implications of Tralfamadorianism become apparent. Although Billy's first attempt to "comfort" someone, a Vietnam war widow's son, fails, Billy blossoms into a charismatic national hero at the time of his assassination in 1976. The public appeal of Tralfamadorianism is obvious. Simply, it frees man from responsibility and from moral action. If all is determined, if there is no why, then no one can be held accountable for anything, neither Dresden nor My Lai. In his personal life, Billy's indifference and apathy toward others are clearly illustrated. Chapter Three offers three consecutive examples of Billy's behavior: he drives away from a black man who seeks to talk with him; he diffidently listens to a vicious tirade by a Vietnam Hawk at his Lions Club meeting; he ignores some cripples selling magazine subscriptions. Yet the Tralfamadorian idea that we can do nothing about anything fully justifies Billy's apathy. When Billy preaches this dogma as part of his "calling," he does a great service for the already apathetic by confining their attitude; he provides them with a philosophical base for their apathy. If one ignores the ghetto or the Vietnam War, neither exists. By exercising one's selective memory, by becoming an ostrich, one may indeed live in a world where everything is beautiful and nothing hurts. Perfect. No wonder Billy is a successful Comforter; he has fulfilled Eliot Rosewater's request that "new lies" be invented or "people Just aren't going to want to go on living."

If Tralfamadorianism is a "new lie," it recalls an "old lie"-God. There is little difference between God's will and accident's will in the novel. For Vonnegut, man's belief in an all-powerful Creator, involved in human history, has resulted in two great evils: the acceptance of war as God's will; the assumption that we carry out God's will and that God is certainly on our side, which justifies all atrocities. Sodom, Gomorrah, Hiroshima, Dresden, My Lai IV-all victims of God's will. Vonnegut directs his rage in *Slaughterhouse-Five* at a murderous, supernatural Christianity that creates Children's Crusades, that allows men to rationalize butchery in the name of God, that absolves men from guilt. Since, for Vonnegut, all wars are, finally, "holy" wars, he urges us to rid ourselves of a supernatural God.

While Vonnegut indicts Tralfamadorianism and supernatural Christianity as savage illusions, he argues in *Slaughterhouse-Five* for a humanistic Christianity, which may also be an illusion, but yet a saving one.

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut associates Billy Pilgrim with Bunyan's Pilgrim and with Christ. A chaplain's assistant in the war with a "meek faith in a loving Jesus," Billy finds the war a vast Slough of Despond; he reaches Dresden, which "looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim," only to witness the Heavenly City's destruction. Often, Vonnegut' s Christian shades into Christ Himself. During the war, Billy hears "Golgotha sounds," foresees his death and resurrection, "'it is time for me to be dead for a little while-and then live again,' " identifies himself fully with Christ: "Now his snoozing became shallower as he heard a man and a woman speaking German in pitying tones. The speakers were commiserating with somebody lyrically. Before Billy

opened his eyes, it seemed to him that the tones might have been those used by the friends of Jesus when they took His ruined body down from His cross." After his kidnapping in 1967 by the Tralfamadorians, Billy assumes the role of Messiah: "He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy believed, because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore." Vonnegut has created a parody Christ whose gospel is Tralfamadorian, who redeems no one, who "cried very little although he often saw things worth crying about, and in *that* respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the carol." Indeed, Pilgrim's dilemma is that he is a double Savior with two gospels-a weeping and loving Jesus and a Tralfamadorian determinist. His opposed gospels drive him mad, render him impotent, result in his crackpot letters to newspapers and in his silent weeping for human suffering. Possibly Billy could have resolved his dilemma if he had paid closer attention to the human Christ in the novels of Billy's favorite writer-Kilgore Trout.

While Vonnegut often mentions Trout's books and stories for satiric purposes, Trout, "this cracked messiah" who has been" 'making love to the world'"_ for years, also serves as Vonnegut's spokesman for a humanistic and naturalistic Christianity. In Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space,* a planetary visitor concludes that Christians are cruel because of "slipshod storytelling in the New Testament," which does not teach mercy, compassion, and love, but instead: *"Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected."* Trout's visitor offers Earth a new Gospel in which Jesus is not divine, but fully human-"a nobody." When the nobody is crucified: "The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity." What Vonnegut suggests here is that Christ's divinity stands in the way of charity. If the "bum" is Everyman, then we are all adopted children of God; we are all Christs and should treat each other accordingly.

As mentioned earlier, both Tralfamadorian determinism and the concept of a Supreme Being calling every shot on Earth nullify human intention, commitment and responsibility. But Vonnegut's humanistic Christianity in the face of a naturalistic universe demands moral choice-demands that we revere each other as Christs, since all are sons and daughters of God. Not surprisingly, Vonnegut's position echoes that of Stephen Crane The correspondent's insight that we are all in the same boat adrift in an indifferent sea, and that once we realize that we have only each other, moral choice is "absurdly clear," is Kurt Vonnegut's insight as well. (Vonnegut mentions *The Red Badge of Courage.)* The courage, sacrifice, and selflessness in *The Red Badge* appear in *Slaughterhouse-Five* also.

While Vonnegut offers several versions of ideal brotherhood in his works-the Karass, the Volunteer Fire Department, and, despite Howard W. Campbell, Jr.'s assessment of American prisoners, moments of brotherhood in *Slaughterhouse Five* -he also suggests an alternative for the individual, a slogan that becomes a way of living. On the same page where Vonnegut says, "Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Viet-nam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do," appears the following prayer and Vonnegut's comment.

GOD GRANT ME
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS
TO TELL THE
DIFFERENCE

Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future.

The Serenity Prayer, sandwiched between episodes concerning Vietnam, is Vonnegut's savage indictment of Billy Pilgrim. In short, Billy lacks the "wisdom" to see that Dresden is of the past and cannot be changed, but that the bombing of North Vietnam lies in the present and can be changed However, to protest the bombing requires moral "courage," a quality obviated by his Tralfamadorian education.

The seemingly innocuous Serenity Prayer, the motto of Alcoholics Anonymous, appears once more in a most significant 10cation-on the last page of Chapter Nine. The truth of Raymond M. Olderman's observation in his *Beyond the Waste Land* that "Vonnegut is a master at getting inside a cliché" is verified when we consider that Vonnegut has transformed the AA motto into a viable moral philosophy. Vonnegut knows that we have to accept serenely those things that people cannot change-the past, linear time, aging, death, natural forces. Yet the Prayer posits that, through moral courage, there are things that can be changed. War, for example, is not a natural force like a glacier, as Harrison Starr would have it. While Billy believes that he cannot change the past, present, or future, Vonnegut suggests that in the arena of the enormous present, we can, with courage, create change: "And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep."

If there is a broad moral implication in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* it is aimed at America. Vonnegut, like his science fictionist Kilgore Trout, "writes about Earthlings all the time and they're all Americans." Vonnegut's message for America is this: America has adopted the Tralfamadorian philosophy, which justifies apathy. We have lost our sense of individuality; we feel powerless, helpless, and impotent; we consider ourselves the "listless playthings of enormous forces." What Vonnegut would have us do is develop the wisdom to discriminate between what we can or cannot change, while developing the courage to change what we can. We have met Billy Pilgrim and he is us.

Source: David L. Vanderwerken, "Pilgrim's Dilemma: *Slaughterhouse-Five,"* In *Research Studies,* Vol. 42, No.3, September, 1974, pp 147-52.

Adaptations

Slaughterhouse-Five was adapted for the screen by writer Stephen Geller and director George Roy Hill in 1972. The film stars Michael Sacks as Billy Pilgrim, Ron Leibman as Paul Lazzaro, and Valerie Perrine as Montana Wildhack. Available on MCA/Universal Home Video.

The novel is also available in abridged form as a sound recording, read by the author, on Harper Audio, 1994.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Dresden, Germany, firebombing *of* World War II and compare Vonnegut' s account of the event with the historical record.

Research the history of UFO sightings in the United States and compare Billy Pilgrim's experience with the Tralfamadorians to actual reported sightings and "abductions".

Compare and contrast *Slaughterhouse-Five* with another well-known novel of war, such as *The Red Badge of Courage* or *All Quiet on the Western Front.*

Compare and Contrast

1940s: World War II was a decisive victory for the United States and its allies and was widely supported by Americans. Americans' knowledge of the war came from delayed accounts in newspapers, on radio, and in newsreels shown in movie theaters. By the end of the war, the United States was the top military and economic power in the world.

1960s: American involvement in the Vietnam War eventually lost the support of most citizens, perhaps in part because of extensive television news coverage, which brought the realities of war into American living rooms. The war concluded in 1975 with the United States withdrawing from Vietnam-the only war America ever lost. While still the "leader of the free world," the Vietnam War deals a strong blow to American prestige around the world.

Today: The United States's most recent military conflict, the Persian Gulf War against Iraq, was an overwhelming victory, in part because of American determination to avoid "another Vietnam." The war enjoyed widespread support among Americans. However, media coverage was carefully controlled by the military. Although the end of the Cold War after the collapse of the Soviet Union left America as the only true "superpower,"' its economic supremacy is being challenged by countries like Japan, China, and Germany. There is a reluctance within the U.S. government and the populace to commit U.S. troops to military conflicts overseas.

1940s: Before the first wave of UFO sightings begins in 1947, popular awareness of "aliens from outer space" was mostly confined to the readers of pulp science fiction magazines.

1960s: The U.S. Air Force reports almost three thousand UFO sightings between 1965 and 1967; congressional hearings on the issue are held in 1966. The science fiction movies of the 1950s and 1960s, television shows such as "Star Trek" and "The Invaders,"' and the American space program all dramatically increase public awareness of the possibility of life on other planets.

Today: Claims of "alien abductions" become almost commonplace. Popular television shows and movies, such as "The X-Files" and "Independence Day,"' and extraordinary public events, such as the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, in 1997, bring public awareness of the UFO phenomenon to all all-time high. The first planets outside the solar system have been discovered, and scientists, led by such astronomers as the late Carl Sagan, now seriously speculate about the possibilities of life on other planets.

What Do I Read Next?

Player Piano, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s 1952 novel, also deals with the limitations of science and technology.

The Red Badge of Courage (1895) is Stephen Crane's classic story of the Civil War that, like Vonnegut's novel, portrays the horrors of war in an unromanticized fashion.

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) is a classic novel of World War I that, like Vonnegut's novel, portrays German soldiers as ordinary people caught up in the horrors of war.

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) was one of the first major American novels based on its author's experiences in World War II.

Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978) was one of the first major American novels based on its author's experiences in Vietnam.

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* 451 (1953) is another example of science fiction as social criticism.

Vonnegut' s 1962 novel, *The Sirens of Titan,* also features the Tralfamadorians.

Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) uses both science fiction devices and an unusual narrative structure to tell a story of alienation and displacement.

More Than Human (1953) is the most famous novel by science fiction Writer Theodore Sturgeon, whom some have cited as a model for Kilgore Trout, Jr.

Venus on the Half-Shell was published in 1975 with Vonnegut' s permission as a science fiction novel by "Kilgore Trout, Jr." It was actually written by Philip Jose Farmer, a well-known science fiction writer who for much of his career, like Trout, wrote visionary works for little financial gain or popular recognition.

Topics for Discussion

1. Describe the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life. How do the Tralfamadorians describe the fate of the universe? How do they react to this vision of the future?

2. Billy thinks of himself as a prophet. Do you agree that he is? Is he in any way a Christ-like prophet?

3. Is Billy's life in Tralfamadore heaven, hell, or just an extension of life on earth?

4. At the beginning of the novel, why does the writer-narrator compare himself to Lot's wife, who defied God by looking back at Sodom and for doing so was turned into a pillar of salt?

5. What is the symbolic significance of telegraphs in the novel?

6. Cite evidence from the novel to support the position that Billy has lost touch with reality and that his time travel is just a function of his madness.

7. Billy is an optometrist whose job it is help people see better by prescribing corrective lenses. Does his profession influence his attempts to look at the world through a Tralfamadorian framework of ideas?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read St. Luke's Gospel in the Bible and demonstrate how it has influenced Billy's "Tralfamadorian adventure with death."

2. Research and describe the bombing of Dresden. Include information about the cultural history of Dresden up until the time it was bombed.

3. Research and explain the philosophical concept of determinism.

4. Research the Children's Crusade and explain why Vonnegut found it an appropriate subtitle for his novel.

5. Research the type of twentieth-century literature referred to as "the absurd," and explain some of the "absurd" characteristics of Slaughterhouse-Five.

Further Study

Clark Mayo, *Kurt Vonnegut. The Gospel from Outer Space; or, Yes We Have No Nirvanas,* Borgo Press, 1977, pp. 45-52.

Discusses *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a response to "the horror and absurdity of war" with emphasis on the novel's unconventional structure.

Leonard Mustazza, *Forever Pursuing Genesis' The Myth of Eden* in *the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut,* Bucknell University Press, 1990, pp 102-15.

Discusses *Slaughterhouse-Five* in terms of Billy Pilgrim's attempts "to construct for himself an Edenic experience" and the "linkage. between Eden and Tralfamadore.

Peter J. Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,* Crowell, 1972, pp. 172-203.

Discusses *Slaughterhouse-Five* as "an effort to bring together all that Vonnegut has been saying about the human condition and contemporary American society". Reed calls the novel "remarkably successful" and "one of Vonnegut' s best:'

Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,* G.K. Hall, 1976, pp. 81 96.

A detailed summary and critique of the novel. The book also contains an extensive bibliography of critical works on Vonnegut.

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David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
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Or you can visit our Internet site at
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535