

# **Timequake Study Guide**

## **Timequake by Kurt Vonnegut**

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# Plot Summary

Timequake does not follow the typical novel structure. Rather than telling a story in a straightforward manner, Kurt Vonnegut decides that only the good parts should be included. This leads to a novel that is partly science fiction and partly philosophical musings and observations. The science fiction plot is simple. The universe, for some unknown reason, stops expanding for a period of ten years. All the people in the world find themselves back exactly one decade to the day and must repeat exactly what had already happened during the decade. This means that free will is suspended. Cars, trucks, airliners and any other mechanical transportation mode drive themselves without human intervention. People move through the decade on autopilot, but when the timequake ends, trouble begins.

Certainly there had been tragedies during the repeated decade, but none of them were surprises. Once the timequake ends, suddenly free will comes back to everyone on the planet. Those who are driving or piloting transportation vehicles have forgotten how to drive or pilot, so crashes occur at an alarming rate. New York City becomes one big mess of mayhem. Kilgore Trout, the author's alter-ego character, steps up to the challenge and takes steps to help the injured. He expresses what becomes Kilgore's Creed. He says that you were sick, but now you are well again and there is work to do. The story ends with a clambake after a play in Rhode Island when Trout observes that human awareness is now the fastest thing in the universe, many millions of times faster than the speed of light.

The story is as much about the author as Trout, and since Trout is the alter-ego, the entire story is mostly about the author. This is his last book. He bids a farewell to the publishing industry and mourns the loss of literature appreciation in the modern technical world. His basic philosophy is humanism, which in its most basic expression is the belief that humans can solve their problems without divine intervention. However, the author's philosophy includes the existential conclusion that life is absurd and therefore funny. Although the author considers himself a kind of agnostic, acknowledging that something like God might exist, he holds deep respect for the beliefs of others, especially if he loves these people. The philosophy is far from simple because, as pointed out many times in the book, reality is often a strange and counter-intuitive thing. An important part of the philosophy is not so much doubt about spirituality but serious doubt about people claiming to have knowledge about spirituality, particularly those who make money from the claims. An interesting paradox arises because the author had studied to become a scientist but also thinks that science might have been the biggest mistake that humankind has ever made. His supporting evidence for this is the hydrogen bomb and computer technology that does more to isolate people than bring them together. Since this book was published in 1997, the advancements in computer technology regarding the Internet and better social capabilities since that time are not considered.



# Prologue, Chapters 1-5

## Prologue, Chapters 1-5 Summary

The author opens the book with a prologue that explains how he took a novel that had not come together very well and cut out all the bad pieces. He compares it to filleting a fish, so only the good meat is presented. The science fiction premise is that the universe stops expanding for a decade, and this causes a timequake. Everybody suddenly finds themselves ten years back to the day, and everybody has to repeat the decade exactly as it happened the first time. The author also explains that Kilgore Trout, a character who often appears in his other novels, is actually the author's alter-ego. Trout also writes science fiction and comes up with the outrageous observations and sayings with which the author might feel uncomfortable.

In Chapter 1, the author expounds on the way people are toward living. Most would rather get the whole thing over with quickly, he observes, because the human race continues to devise ever more clever doomsday devices and pollutes the planet. In Chapter 2 he points out that the atomic bomb project started at the University of Chicago, and the first bomb dropped was on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Fifty years later he attended an anniversary at the chapel on the University's campus. This brings up the memory of Andrei Sakharov who had developed the hydrogen bomb for the USSR and also won the Nobel Peace Prize. In Chapter 3, the author brings up a short story written by Trout entitled No Laughing Matter. The story is about a third atomic bomb that was to be dropped on Okinawa after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs had been dropped. The flight crew decides that a third bombing is not necessary and returns to base. During the court-martial at the base, the island sinks into oblivion.

In Chapter 4, the author remembers part of his history during World War II. He had been a spotter for the artillery and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He then briefly outlines his career after the war. He had worked for General Electric, sold cars and taught English. In Chapter 5, the author explains that he roughs out short stories, attributes them to Kilgore Trout and puts them in novels. Trout's story, The Sisters B-36, is a tale about three sisters who live on a planet named Booboo. Two of the sisters are artistic. The third out of jealousy becomes a scientist who invents destructive things like machine guns because she is very angry. A generation later, the Booboolings lose their imaginations.

## Prologue, Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Vonnegut is known for writing unusual novels. They can be taken as humorous narratives or even standup comedy routines never performed in public. He uses several comedic techniques in the opening prologue and chapters that set the mood and tone for the rest of the novel. This really is not a story in the traditional sense, but a series of setups and callbacks with pithy observations placed in strategically important places.



The prose approaches the efficiency of poetry, in which every word must count toward creating images and impressions that will stick with the reader. The chapters are short, not more than two or three pages.

This is the last novel that the author published while alive. He eerily casts the story in terms of his last novel, as if knowing that it would be his last. The implication he uses is that he will retire from writing after this story, but the dark themes brought forward regarding living and dying are either prophetic or reflect his feelings at the age of his writing, which was seventy-four. Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007 at the age of eighty-four, a decade after publication. The timequake in the story involves a decade also.

A common Vonnegut theme repeated in this book is that human beings are self-destructive and quite insane to build something like the hydrogen bomb. However, he brings the theme out through Kilgore Trout, a character who always maintains brutal honesty while inventing tag lines for himself. For example, Trout refers to World War II as the second time that western civilization had tried to kill itself, the first time being World War I. Consistently cynical about science, he ends his short story with the Booboolings becoming "the most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies" (p. 18). Vonnegut is saying through a thin veil that civilization had made a huge mistake by taking up science. He also acknowledges this and goes so far as to explain exactly what he is doing, which adds humor to an otherwise grim subject.



# Chapters 6-10

## Chapters 6-10 Summary

In Chapter 6, the story jumps ahead to a clambake after the timequake that takes place at a writers' retreat called Xanadu, located in Rhode Island. Kilgore Trout makes several of his insightful observations, among them that life in general is preposterous, but events like the clambake, with its delicious food and beautiful women beneath a starry sky, allow us to put up with it. The author reflects on the theatrical plays that had impressed him during his life and writes about the time his thirteen-year-old daughter Lily played a role in Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*. Lily had played Emily. The main ideas the author had taken from the plays were to pay attention, live life in the moment and to depend upon the generosity of strangers. Tennessee Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* had impressed him. He bemoans the fact that modern life has taken much of our common experiences away.

In Chapter 7, the clambake goes on with Trout giving his interpretation of the biblical Genesis story. He claims that God is a man and Satan a woman. God created the world, which made Satan wonder what He was doing. After God created Adam and Eve, Satan had them eat the apple from the Tree of Knowledge to try and help out. Some of the ideas in the apple turned out badly. In Chapter 8 the author writes about various addictions that humans have gained since getting all that knowledge from the apple. Included are alcohol, gambling and writing. He introduces the American Academy of Arts and Letters located in New York City.

In Chapter 9, the author describes the origination of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and introduces Monica Pepper, a fictional character who works as the Executive Secretary of the Academy, along with her husband Zoltan. Zoltan is a paraplegic because Monica had swan dived into a pool and hit him, breaking his back. In Chapter 10 the author writes about his older sister, Allie, and their mutual admiration for John Dillinger, a famous bank robber during the 1930s.

## Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Trout's theology, although greatly simplified, involves necessary consequences. The idea of up necessitates its opposite, down. The idea of God necessitates His opposite, Satan. Traditionally Satan has been depicted as a male demon, but in Trout's case the necessary opposite must be female due to God's maleness. The apple symbolizes the knowledge of good and evil, implying that an equal amount of useful knowledge balanced the knowledge that led to disasters. As the author's alter ego, Trout can express ideas that the author would otherwise hold back. Vonnegut's personal religious beliefs are not exactly atheistic. He allows for the possibility of God or something similar but does not attempt to define God. Life is preposterous, so says Trout, and that could be taken as existential. Existentialism maintains that life is absurd, among many other



philosophical stances. Usually Vonnegut is characterized as being a humanist, which involves the belief that humans can solve life's problems without the intervention of a deity.

Vonnegut plays with the notion that writing is an addiction, just as alcohol and gambling are addictive. His point is that writers have no choice but to write, and this addiction can lead to self-destructive behaviors. Trout writes prolifically using pen and paper. In his past he had published many short stories, but now he tries to throw them away. Vonnegut may be saying that his own days of writing short stories are over too, although two collections have been published posthumously.

The introductions of Allie, Monica and Zoltan briefly sketch the characters. At this point in the story, their importance remains vague, as does the significance of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Vonnegut once served as the Academy's President, an important detail to keep in mind.



# Chapters 11-15

## Chapters 11-15 Summary

The author bemoans losing the appreciation of reading over the decades in Chapter 11. He writes to a poet friend who turns the author's prose into poetry. The poet friend sends it back, and although the author appreciates the effort, he still thinks his writing is bad and not fit for publication. In Chapter 12 the author imagines a meeting of the elements from the periodic table. Sodium predicts that acne and jock itch will become fatal. In Chapter 13 the author tells of Trout's location next door to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in a building that once housed the Museum of the American Indian. Now set up as a homeless shelter, Trout has a cot against the wall shared by the Museum and Academy. He had been taken to the shelter during a sweep of New York City public libraries and had finished his short story entitled *The Sisters B-36*. Trout throws the story away in a lidless wire trash receptacle in front of the Academy. In Chapter 14 Trout gives the background on his expression, "Ting-a-ling!" It was the punch line in a dirty joke that Trout's father had once told. In Chapter 15, while Trout is throwing away the short story, a guard for the Academy observes the action. Because Trout resembles a bag lady, the guard, named Dudley Prince, thinks he is female. Prince retrieves the story once Trout goes back into the homeless shelter.

## Chapters 11-15 Analysis

The author lays out several absurd story elements within this series of chapters. Central to them is Kilgore Trout with his eccentricities. Trout dresses in a manner that makes him appear to be a bag lady to the casual observer, which is probably a disguise to garner more sympathy than a homeless man. As a strategy for survival, this reveals a sharp mind behind the eccentric man. Trout wants people to discount him as insane but harmless, as with his use of nonsense when responding to vapid but polite expressions. Since Trout is also the author's alter-ego, these may be behaviors that Vonnegut might have liked to try.





# Chapters 16-20

## Chapters 16-20 Summary

In Chapter 16, the author quotes from Trout's unfinished memoir, *My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot*, regarding the timequake. Everybody in the world is brought back ten years due to the universe stopping its expansion, and then everybody had to repeat exactly what had already happened during those ten years. The implication is that free will is suspended during the repeat ten years. Cars would drive themselves, and planes would fly safely or unsafely. People simply could do nothing to change what had already happened. In Chapter 17, the author ties Zolant Pepper to Trout. While a high school sophomore, Zolant had copied one of Trout's published short stories and handed it in as his own work. The plagiarism was immediately detected and Zolant punished. When Prince shows the discarded manuscript to Zolant, he becomes excited that Trout is writing again. In Chapter 18, Trout expresses his contempt for writing literature rather than his style of science fiction in which the characters are closer to caricatures. In Chapter 19, Trout writes more stories that he throws in the trash. Prince keeps retrieving and reading them, hoping to find "some important message from a higher power encoded therein" (pg. 66.) In Chapter 20, the author describes another of Trout's stories, this one about Hitler in his bunker at the end of World War II. In it the officers play Bingo with the children, reflecting the title, *Bunker Bingo Party*. Before Hitler shoots himself, he utters the word Bingo.

## Chapters 16-20 Analysis

The author brings out some common yet existential expressions used in society. Hitler protests that he had not asked to be born before shooting himself, making Bingo his final word. The author quotes from one of his son's books: We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is. Another expression is the question, "How the hell did I do that?" This refers both to Trout's writing and the rebuilding of the author's writer's nook. The thematic idea is that we humans pretend to understand what life is about, yet are either amazed that we have done something well or in the end have nothing much to say about it. The short scene about Hitler is full of black humor. Shortly before all in the bunker commit suicide by swallowing cyanide pills, a win at Bingo gives them a brief hope that things might not be as bad as they seem. A direct hit by a Russian howitzer shell stops that nonsense and moves directly into Hitler's last word on earth, a pathetic declaration heard at church bazaars across the land. The end to life is death and that is a reliable truth.



# Chapters 21-25

## Chapters 21-25 Summary

In Chapter 21, the author reflects on his humanism. He does not want to convert anyone to humanism and recognizes the importance of religion for most people. He regrets that one of his friends from World War II had lost his faith during the war, not so much the tragedy of this but because he likes this person very much and hated to see the loss. Humanism, observes the author, is for the comfortable middle class. Religion is for those who must struggle with life. In Chapter 22, the author accounts for what Monica and Zoltan Pepper were doing when the timequake struck. Monica was worked on the Academy budget, and Zoltan was ringing the doorbell at the Academy. Right after the timequake ended, a runaway fire truck kills Zoltan because the driver had no idea that once free will kicked in again, he would actually have to drive the truck. In Chapter 23, the author remembers a friend who had won a bronze star in the war, and another who cried at the ending of Hemingway's A Farwell to Arms. Rather than tears of sadness, the author attributes them to tears of relief because the main characters never had to get married and put up with tedious lives. In Chapter 24, the author writes about marriage and how putting in many hours of togetherness qualifies for celebrating anniversaries more than once a year. He feels that the knowledge of lovemaking that Eve acquired by eating Satan's apple is almost as good as the knowledge of jazz. In Chapter 25, the author tells of the fates that his siblings had found after World War II. Nobody married into money and the lives were largely unremarkable yet satisfying enough

## Chapters 21-25 Analysis

The author's humanism takes center stage in these chapters. He does not think that humanism is anything big and wonderful, just an acknowledgement that he and those who think like him can never understand God or creation, so what is the point in trying? He doubts all the talk about God that preachers like to practice and others like to follow. His comfort with life in the here and now is sufficient for his spiritual needs, which amount to making witty observations on life and the human condition.

The very short snippets of lives that he presents move along the theme that life is largely absurd, but not entirely in the existential way. Rather than leading to some profound generalities about life, the stories demonstrate that most of the time, things happen for no apparent reason. A soldier fires a bazooka into a parked tank with a radio playing music in it. For this a bronze star is awarded upon the assumption that enemy soldiers must have been listening. Zoltan dies when a runaway fire truck hits him, a result of the timequake but not exactly a cause-effect situation. The driver had merely forgotten how to drive. As for marriage, the author finds it a pleasurable experience but nothing, literally, to write about. His philosophy is not one of depression but of looking at reality while neither pumping it up nor ignoring the beauty of it. Reality, to Vonnegut's

mind, stands just fine on its own. No gods are necessary to experience it and no exaggerations need be done to describe it.



# Chapters 26-30

## Chapters 26-30 Summary

In Chapter 26, the author describes how people need to suspend their natural skepticism to enjoy fiction and poetry, but that this could go too far. An example he gives is Trout's story about a world in which the people are so stupid that they did not know another hemisphere existed on their planet until only five hundred years ago. The character of Fleon Sunoco is introduced in Chapter 27. Fleon has a theory that highly intelligent people must have radio receivers in their heads. He conducts examination of stolen brains, those of deceased Mensa members and those who have died from very stupid accidents. Fleon discovers a tiny bump in the inner ear of the Mensa members, but none of the stupid accident victims has the bump. He goes out and buys a suit of tails in preparation for Stockholm and the Nobel Prize. In Chapter 28, Trout explains that Fleon committed suicide dressed in his tails because he had become convinced that his discovery could not have been made by a typical human mind. The author goes on to describe the mayhem that occurred once free will kicked in again for everyone in forms of mechanical transportation or in the path of the transportation. Trout escapes because he was doing what he usually did, write stories, and there was no significant difference between not having free will and having it. In Chapter 29 the author describes how nearly everyone on foot in the western hemisphere fell down once free will kicked in again. This was due to everyone forgetting to care during the rewind decade, a situation he names Post-Timequake Apathy or PTA. In Chapter 30, the author relates stories of healthy people falling down, losing their dignity, and how funny the real-life slapstick is.

## Chapters 26-30 Analysis

These chapters explore the idea of human intelligence. The author suggests that we are not so smart if our species went for millions of years ignorant that two hemispheres existed, the eastern and western. However, since that discovery, scientific knowledge has moved ahead extremely fast, and so the idea that very smart people must be getting help from somewhere else comes into play. Fleon finds the answer in the inner ear of Mensa members, but this discovery is itself a contradiction. Fleon is not that smart, and certainly not smart enough to accept paradox in the world. He ends up jumping to his death dressed in the tails that he bought to accept the Nobel Prize, which of course never happened. Meanwhile, people become extremely dense while on auto-pilot during the timequake. The shift from no free will, having been the norm for a decade and thereby conditioned into the human psyche, becomes at best embarrassing and at worse fatal for those awake once free will kicks in again. Those people living in the eastern hemisphere have it better because most of them had been asleep when the timequake started, and were therefore still asleep when it ended.

Another idea explored is that even with our advanced technologies, higher standards of living, and greater degrees of freedom, people in the western hemisphere find living not



all that satisfying for the most part. This is an opinion of the author that he also discounts due to his monopolar depression, an invented medical term that he also attributes as the source of his writing talent. Before medical science gave it a name, this was generally referred to as having a melancholic personality and is not necessarily tied to clinical depression. Some people just feel sad most of the time, and considering the realities in the world, are highly justified. Vonnegut has written about World War II, most notably Slaughterhouse Five. Feeling sad about this, his sister's death from cancer at the young age of forty-one and perhaps contemplating his own death justify the sadness. Yet the author keeps humor going in his work, a likely coping mechanism and the touchstone of many comedians. Life is sad but also funny and it is better to laugh than cry.



# Chapters 31-35

## Chapters 31-35 Summary

In Chapter 31, the initial actions taken by Trout and Prince are described. Trout runs into the Academy shouting that free will has returned. A falling chandelier from the impact of the fire truck nearly crushes Prince, who is saved by a smoke alarm going off. He was trying to decide whether to answer the doorbell, which Zoltan was ringing, or attend to the smoke detector. In Chapter 32, Trout goes out into the street and sees the fire truck rolling backwards toward the Hudson River. The sounds of distant mayhem fill the air as the return to free will results in traffic and airliner accidents, yet the street he is on remains relatively calm. He waits for emergency vehicles to show up, but realizes that all emergency response must be disabled too. In Chapter 33, the author gives credit to Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) as the best English writer, better than Shakespeare (1564-1616.) Andrewes had translated the King James Bible. In Chapter 34 the author reminisces about his first wife, Jane, and her death. Jane had been full of good cheer all her days. She died believing in Christianity, and that made the author happy because he loved her. In Chapter 35 the author describes writers as either swoopers or bashers. The swoopers write a rough story and go back for revisions. A basher writes the story carefully, one sentence at a time, until it is finished. He has noticed that women tend to be swoopers and men bashers. He then remembers a dying Nazi SS officer right after the end of World War II. The officer's final words were that he had wasted the last ten years of his life.

## Chapters 31-35 Analysis

These chapters flesh out the timequake story a bit more, carrying over the theme from the previous chapters. Then the author gives his take on how different people write, observing that women approach the task significantly different than men. He speculates that this might have something to do with genetics and relates it to how his children and the children of those he knows turn out well, but also the way they had to turn out. Fate may not be in the stars but are definitely in the genes. The timequake is also an expression of fate, since the events of the decade must work out exactly as they had the first time through. In this sense, free will might be an illusion in that decisions individuals make are limited by genetics. The final outcome may have been predetermined. The trouble with the idea of fate versus free will is that no control experiment can ever be conducted to verify things one way or the other. Once something happens it becomes set into stone, although interpretations of what happened will likely vary among individuals and change over time as memories fade or stories become enhanced.



# Chapters 36-40

## Chapters 36-40 Summary

In Chapter 36, the author thinks about ideas that he once held that should be repudiated now that he is older. Others have thought of him as being hot stuff, but he has never considered himself that way. Regarding socialism, he had been strong on that political and economic side in his youth, but since then has realized that the ideals of socialism will likely never be realized. He nonetheless thinks the ideals are still worth pursuing such as to eliminate hunger, homelessness and illiteracy. In Chapter 37, Trout admits that his actions after the end of the timequake were self-serving and cowardly, not heroic as some people thought. He was trying to find shelter from the ever-growing din of disasters outside. In Chapter 38, the author reflects that no matter how good one is at anything, there will always be people better at it somewhere in the world. His advice is to stay home. In Chapter 39, the author observes that after a certain age, people can be successful with or without a college education. He remembers his first newspaper job. The hiring editor of the local paper asked the author what he wanted to do in the newspaper business, and he answered that he wanted to work for a large paper. The editor made a call and got him a job with a large newspaper. In Chapter 40, the author recounts that he refused the job with the big paper in favor of college. He tells the story of his father at a hunting shack, in which the father is chosen the camp cook. The father makes the meals worse and worse, because anyone complaining about the cooking would immediately become the camp cook.

## Chapters 36-40 Analysis

An underlying thematic idea accompanies the apparently disjointed stories. The thematic idea has to do with the expectations of what the United States would become after World War II. The author believed that the US would take on some of the socialism of the USSR, and that the USSR would encourage some of the freedoms in the US. To some extent this was tried with the Great Society of President Johnson in the 1960s and the introduction of capitalism to the former USSR once the alliance fell apart in the 1980s. Idealism ran straight into the realities of human nature. People would seek the easy path, such as the author opting for college rather than taking the more challenging job with a large newspaper. His father tried to shirk the cooking duties at the hunting camp by making the meals continually worse, even though he was a good cook. As for Trout, his actions after the timequake had run its course were not heroic at all, just an old man trying to avoid disaster. Although sounding good, idealism often cannot be realized due to how people behave and think, while storytelling generally elevates the motives of perceived heroes beyond reasonable human potentials.

# Chapters 41-45

## Chapters 41-45 Summary

In Chapter 41, the author remembers how his maternal grandfather married a crazy violinist after his first wife had died in childbirth. The second wife tortured her step-children both physically and emotionally out of insane jealousy, leaving lifelong scars. The result was a disdain for European and American aristocracy that carried through to the author. In Chapter 42 the author lists some of the men he has known who committed suicide. Upon asking a physician who treated drug addicts at Bellevue Hospital whether the patients contemplated suicide, the physician tells him that the patients were insulted if asked. "An idea that sick had never entered their heads!" (pg. 141.) In Chapter 43, the author tells of his brother's experimental art, basically different colors of oil paint squashed between glass or tile surfaces. The question is whether this is art or not, and the author does not think it is art. Not enough of the artist exists in the interesting but purely accidental patterns, and not enough craft is involved. In Chapter 44, the author describes a showing of his art in Denver, which he created using a convoluted method of ink on acetate, then silk screening. In Chapter 45, the author expresses disappointment stemming from the idealism of socialism, primarily that an amendment to the Constitution should be ratified that guarantees meaningful work to every citizen at a living rate of pay. The idealism expected that, after the Bill of Rights, Emancipation and women's vote, the next logical step would be economic justice.

## Chapters 41-45 Analysis

The thematic ideas proposed in these chapters include that seemingly well-off middle class men take their lives more often than the dregs of society, and art is more than creating something novel. The author creates his own art through writing and drawing. The difference could have been expressed as that between tacky folk art and serious attempts at communicating through art. However, the touchstone remains that other people have to like the art enough to buy it, and his brother's art is novel enough to meet this criterion. The proposed Constitutional amendment is accompanied by another proposal, that every newborn would be sincerely welcomed and cared for until maturity. This is another statement of the author's humanism as tied to socialistic ideals.





# Chapters 46-50

## Chapters 46-50 Summary

In Chapter 46, Trout's actions after the timequake are described. He finds the smoke alarm and sees a lit cigar smoldering in an ash tray. He crushes it out. Then Trout takes a picture off the wall with the intention of smashing the smoke alarm with it, but the alarm stops on its own. He replaces the picture and makes sure it is straight. In Chapter 47, the author tells of his uncle's love of books and how he would give the author the best written. The author describes his relationship to books when he says, "But by accident, not by cunning calculation, books, because of their weight and texture, and because of their sweetly token resistance to manipulation, involve our hands and eyes, and then our minds and souls, in a spiritual adventure I would be very sorry for my grandchildren not to know about" (pg. 157.) In Chapter 48 the author describes how Trout's parents had studied birds near Bermuda and woodpeckers in Nova Scotia. The birds were behaving abnormally, kicking eggs off a high rock in Bermuda and gorging on black flies in Nova Scotia. In Chapter 49, the author criticizes the economic system as being the redistribution of wealth upward in a very unhelpful manner. In Chapter 50 the author reflects on the changing attitudes toward words and concepts, especially socialism. Trout manages to convince Prince that he has free will after the timequake, which does not impress Prince.

## Chapters 46-50 Analysis

The author covers earlier themes that the movement away from books toward electronic documents reduces human experience, and socialism has become a failure in the general perception of politics. Observations are put forth that indicate failures in evolution, the birds near Bermuda destroying their own eggs, and the woodpeckers in Nova Scotia gorging themselves on black flies until they become overweight and easy prey. The ideas relate on the level of human failures being not so different from failures in natural evolution. Changes are often not for the better, and perhaps the majority of changes are failures. The author points out that even though socialism failed for the USSR, our present economic system has major faults in it as well, such as wealth concentrating too much at the top.



# Chapters 51-55

## Chapters 51-55 Summary

In Chapter 51, Trout puts on a spare guard's uniform. He and Prince go to the former Museum of the American Indian, where they tell all the homeless men Kilgore's Creed that, "You were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do." The homeless men become motivated to help people who are suffering after the end of the timequake. The author reveals that Kilgore's Creed is later recited in schools after the Pledge of Allegiance. In Chapter 52, the author promotes family values, but not the usual meaning of nuclear family of parents and children. He means an extended family, a closely knit conglomeration of parents, grandparents, children, uncles, aunts and cousins. He also mentions that Trout had acquired a bazooka, which he used to blow up unoccupied cars that had their alarms going off. In Chapter 53, Trout has converted the homeless shelter into a hospital. He still carries the bazooka he had found in the Academy. In Chapter 54, the government declares martial law. Trout's hospital is turned into a barracks, and the Academy into an officers' club. In Chapter 55 the author reflects on human intelligence and the aging process. He likens old age to a race horse being put to pasture after its prime.

## Chapters 51-55 Analysis

These chapters help flesh out the science fiction part of the novel regarding what happened after the timequake. Trout leads the efforts to bring order to the chaos, or at least to help the wounded in his makeshift hospital that had been a homeless shelter. The government must declare martial law because suddenly the whole population regained free will and had no idea what to do with it. Somebody had to take control and direct the people. This can be considered an allegory for people who never accept their free will, living their lives by the direction of others. The central concept is that free will involves a high degree of responsibility in that blaming others for negative outcomes becomes a non-issue. If we make our decisions based on our own free will, then whatever happens next, however unpredictable it may be, is our sole responsibility. On the other hand, not having free will and then suddenly having it again leads directly into disaster. In the story, planes fall out of the sky once they run out of fuel because the pilots have forgotten how to fly. Cars, trucks, and buses crash into each other because the drivers have forgotten how to drive. People fall down because they have forgotten how to walk. The author and Trout think that free will is highly overrated. Only a few people know how to use it and even fewer know how to use it well.



# Chapters 56-63

## Chapters 56-63 Summary

The author explains in Chapter 56 that he still writes on a typewriter and does not own a computer. He needs to mail some pages to his long-term typist and walks down to a stationary store to buy an envelope. He enjoys getting out into the world the way everyone used to, before computers made staying indoors most of the time possible. In Chapter 57, the author takes his pages and envelope to a Postal Convenience Station. He confesses a deep love for the female postal clerk there, although she knows nothing about it. In Chapter 58, the author writes about teaching creative writing. His take is that nothing new can be written, so why bother? To answer his own question, he promotes this idea that "I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people don't care about them. You are not alone" (pg. 193.) In Chapter 59 the author mentions John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, and a story about his affair two years before the assassination. This story had been in the first draft of *Timequake*. In Chapter 60, Trout is given the task of blowing an antique steam whistle attached to a canister of compressed air during the play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. In Chapter 61 Trout blows the whistle on cue, ending the dramatic play about Lincoln leaving Illinois to start his first term as President of the United States. Trout lets out an audible sob after the curtains close. In Chapter 62, the author and Trout attend a clambake after the play. Many people familiar to the author are there. In Chapter 63, the author takes the stage with Trout. Trout explains to the audience that a new part of physics should be included in any future study, that being human awareness. He demonstrates this by having the author look at two stars in the night sky about ten feet apart. Trout says that human awareness moved between the stars millions of times faster than the speed of light.

## Chapters 56-63 Analysis

The story ends on a positive note that human awareness is now the fastest moving thing in the universe. Trout's use of a simple demonstration leads directly into the idea. He has the author pick out two stars in the night sky. It had taken millions of light years for the dim pinpoints to reach earth, yet human awareness of the stars' existence happened in an instance. Furthermore, human awareness includes certain facts about stars that were not understood until relatively recently. Peering out into the universe is the same as looking at history because events could have happened, but the light has yet to reach the earth. The two stars the author selects could have burned out long ago.

The ironies in life that the author writes about include the need for new writing even if the stories are old. He includes an observation from a Gothic novelist that describes the Gothic novel as a young woman entering an old house and becoming scared out of her wits. Reduced to its simplest form, the novel structure takes on a disarming simplicity, much as reducing a video game to its most basic programmed engine eliminates all of



the entertainment value. Life experiences can all be reduced to their simplest expressions, but that also takes away entertainment value, which the author cherishes when he walks to a stationary store to buy an envelope, then mail it where his imagined one true love works. The good parts of life exist in imagination, as do the bad parts, and without imagination, which involves human awareness, life reduces to merely existing without much sentience until death.

The timequake served to reawaken human awareness of free will and the dangers of suddenly going off autopilot. Disastrous results occurred, but that also gives Trout the ability to step up and make a difference. Trout's character becomes delighted to have a role in the play, the blowing of the whistle. The emotional impact of the play causes him to sob at the end. The clambake seems like an extended family to Trout, and in this way the recluse author who wrote stories only to throw them away returns home. This makes a fitting end to Kilgore Trout and Kurt Vonnegut's writing career, an heroic novel structure in which the young writer headed out in the world, did the best he could under varying circumstances, and returns home victorious in that he helped people get through this thing, whatever it is.



# Characters

## Kurt Vonnegut

Since the author includes so many anecdotes and observations about his own experiences, he qualifies as a main character. His memories range from childhood to recent experience, with special emphasis on World War II and the atomic bomb. During the war, Vonnegut served as an artillery spotter. He personally did not kill a single person during the war, even while fighting the Battle of the Bulge. The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did leave a lasting impression that human beings work very hard at self-destruction. Extending from this, the author concludes that most people would like life to be over with as soon as possible. Tied to this is the author's overall humanistic philosophy, which he considers a luxury that only the comfortable middle class can afford. The lower classes need religion to help cope with the harsher realities, and the upper classes might not need philosophy at all. The author does not speculate on the upper classes, probably because his focal point is on his position. He presents the position of the lower class through the eyes of his fictional alter-ego, Kilgore Trout.

Vonnegut is a sympathetic man. He cheers for the downtrodden while expressing contempt for many who occupy his position in life. The author can list people he has known who have committed suicide while being relatively successful in life, at least on the surface. Meanwhile, the downtrodden never seem to even consider this way out, although these people have better reasons. Rather than trying to explain why this might be, the author reports on his findings and leaves it at that. This style of writing goes along the journalistic line of telling who, what, where and when. Why something has happened is occasionally done but is not a primary focus for journalism.

## Kilgore Trout

Kilgore Trout is the author's fictional alter-ego. As such, Trout gets to express things that the author would not otherwise bring up. Trout is far more cynical than the author, yet has greater sensitivity to the evils in the world. The author often dismisses paradoxes in the world with a literary wave of the hand, while Trout makes up some kind of tagline that he delights in using on people. Trout is also the author's urge to write all the time, especially short stories. Vonnegut had written many short stories when it was still possible to make a living from it. Trout, like the author, cannot stop thinking up short stories, writing them and then throwing them away. The author credits Trout with his short story ideas, which is likely Vonnegut's method of throwing them away. This is not the same as Trout tossing the stories into the trash and at least the general ideas become published as part of a novel.

Trout's stories serve to bring out the absurdities in the human condition, but his actions directly after the end of the timequake reveal the deep regard for humanity the character has. As the author's alter-ego, Trout can become overly excited about the return of free



will and sob at the end of a play, whereas Vonnegut would likely not show the emotions. They both share the attitude that life is mostly absurd, although there are good parts to it as well. Another part that Trout might play is giving voice to the author's older brother, Bernard. The only evidence that this might be the case is the epilogue, in which the author writes about Bernard.

## Writers

Three other writers are mentioned and quoted in the book. They are Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, Tennessee Williams, *A Street Car Named Desire*, and Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. These writers are brought up because they have written works that Vonnegut greatly admires. Wilder is important because his play is about an extended family in a small town. Vonnegut feels that people live best in an extended family, and that modern life works to destroy the extended family. Williams gives one of the author's callback lines, to depend on the generosity of strangers. Miller provides the idea of suicide while doing well in life, indicating hidden and suppressed suffering.

## Monica Pepper

Monica Pepper is the Executive Secretary of the Academy of Arts and Letters. A wall separates her from Kilgore Trout's cot in the homeless shelter.

## Zoltan Pepper

Zoltan Pepper is Monica's husband. He is paraplegic due to a swimming pool accident and comes out of the timequake ringing the doorbell of the Academy. A runaway fire truck kills him shortly afterward.

## Dudley Prince

Dudley Prince is the armed guard at the Academy. He retrieves the discarded stories that Kilgore Trout writes and reads them for some clue about a higher power.

## Hitler

Hitler shouts, "Bingo!" before shooting himself in one of Kilgore Trout's stories set in Hitler's bunker while the Russians overrun Berlin.

## Alice (Allie) Vonnegut

Allie is the author's older sister. She dies of cancer at the age of forty-one. The author thinks she would have made a delightful old woman.



## **Adrei Sakharov**

Andrei Sakharov brought the hydrogen bomb to the USSR. Despite this, the USSR persecuted him.

## **Satan**

Kilgore Trout's version of Satan is that of a woman trying to help out humanity after creation. This has strong parallels to the myth of Prometheus in ancient Greek literature.



## Objects/Places

### Xanadu

Xanadu is a writers' retreat located on Point Zion in Rhode Island. This is where the clambake takes place after the timequake. Xanadu is a reference to a Chinese province in which Kubla Khan established a pleasure garden, according to a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

### Planet Booboo

The planet Booboo is a setting in one of Kilgore Trout's short stories. The Booboolings lose their imagination to science and become merciless creatures.

### American Academy of Arts and Letters

The Academy is where Kilgore Trout goes after the timequake ends. He also throws his short stories away in a wire trash receptacle outside the Academy.

### Former Museum of the American Indian

The Museum becomes a homeless shelter next door to the Academy. Kilgore Trout stays at the homeless shelter and turns it into a hospital after the timequake.

### American Humanist Association

The author gives a talk at the Association regarding the passing of Isaac Asimov, a famous science fiction writer.

### Joy's Pride

Joy's Pride is the name of the bomber that, in one of Kilgore Trout's stories, leaves an island to drop a third atomic bomb on Okinawa. The pilot and crew decide to return to base without dropping the bomb and are court-martialed.

### Bingo

Bingo is the game that the Nazi officers play with the children in Hitler's bunker at the end of World War II. This is within the context of a Kilgore Trout short story.





## **Trash Receptacle**

The trash receptacle is located outside the Academy. This is where Kilgore Trout throws away his short stories and where Dudley Prince retrieves them to read.

## **Occam's Razor**

Occam's Razor is a technique of information analysis. The technique is to look for the simplest explanation for any given situation, as opposed to elaborate conspiracy theories. The author mentions Occam's Razor regarding situations presented in the story.

## **Atomic Bomb**

Work on the Atomic Bomb began in Chicago. The author goes to Chicago for the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.

# Themes

## Free Will

The timequake takes free will from the world for a period of ten years. Although Kilgore Trout thinks that free will is highly overrated, the effects of the timequake on humans become disastrous once it ends. This is a logical extension of what might happen should free will be suspended for a significant amount of time and points to the existence of free will within the normal time-space continuum. With free will, people need to learn things and keep on their toes, such as how to drive a car. Without free will, people go on autopilot. Life is predictable, yet still not safe.

Arguments have been constructed regarding free will and destiny. However, destiny cannot be proven. It is likely an illusion due to the fact that people need to be ever vigilant in order to avoid accidents and thereby survive. Nevertheless, there are life conditions such as genetics that restrict free will and can be interpreted as destiny. The author uses his observations about children and how they grow up as evidence for genetic destiny. The children become the adults they had to become. Destiny might be evident in species such as ants since they have few decisions to make in life. With the more complex human species, the decisions are manifold, even the decisions not to make decisions. Free will from this perspective seems undeniable. The timequake is the author's expression that free will, although often taken for granted, does indeed exist as an integral part of human life.

## Absurdity of Life

Life is often absurd. A bronze star is awarded to a soldier who blew up an enemy tank, and the only evidence that anyone was in the tank consists of the sound of a radio. Kilgore Trout writes stories, only to throw them in the trash. Trout disdains free will, yet becomes very excited upon its return after the timequake. One of his sayings becomes a part of the culture because it seems to help people. Many honored people do not deserve the honor, at least from an objective perspective. The author himself does not consider the honors bestowed upon him to be justified. This take on life is very similar to existentialism, although that philosophy tends more toward seriousness, such as unjustified capital punishment. Vonnegut prefers the funny side of absurdity, pointing out the failures of others and including himself in the mix. He is, after all, human just like the rest of us.

This is one of the author's great appeals to his fans. He does not place himself above anyone else, but tries to express things that others are likely thinking to assure people that they are not alone. The author does not take credit for doing this in ways that most people cannot, although he does attribute his writing talent to having something wrong with his head, which he terms as being monopolar (in contrast to bipolar, formerly known as manic-depressive). The humor conveyed in relationship to the absurdity of life



puts the author's philosophy into a far less depressing context than existentialism. Life may be absurd, but this does not imply that life is meaningless. To the contrary, the author presents the story as a tale of the richness in life, punctuated by humor and deeply felt emotions. Trout lets out an audible sob at the end of the play in which he participates, tooting the steam whistle at the right time as Abraham Lincoln leaves Illinois to start his first term as President of the United States.

## Love

Throughout the story, love plays an important, if not often acknowledged, role. The author hates it when one of his close friends loses his faith in God. This is not to bemoan the loss in faith but the loss that his friend experiences. Any loss would have been hateful because the author loved this man. Vonnegut also hopes that his first wife has found her heaven, which she believed in strongly. He hopes this because he still loves her. The point is that philosophy is not the important part of life and love is. People do not need to understand everything and in fact have run straight into the hydrogen bomb while trying to do so.

The majority of the book has to do with the author's memories throughout life. Each snippet of story carries with it respect and admiration for those he has met, the women he has loved, and the children he either raised or watched being raised by close friends. At the time of writing, a good many of the people with whom he grew up with have died, including a key agent who had put his writing career on track. The story is more than science fiction. It is also Vonnegut's memoirs tucked between the plot of the timequake. He bids farewell to all of those he has loved in the last scene at the clambake, where tout le monde was there. He joins his alter-ego Kilgore Trout while Trout explains an interesting and even astounding, fundamental truth of physics and humanity, when he says that human awareness is the fastest thing in the universe. By this statement, the author leaves his fans with an expression of love. We exist and we exist for a very good reason. Our awareness may have brought on the threat of global thermonuclear war, but through our awareness of love, we might just get through this thing. whatever it is.



# Style

## Point of View

The author tells the story through his point of view, which regularly shifts from the first-person limited to the third-person omniscient. The third-person point of view is used to tell Kilgore Trout's experiences with the timequake, but the author injects his experiences as well via the first-person point of view. The effect is to keep Trout and the author separated until the final chapter, in which they join together for the demonstration of human awareness and its amazing speed.

Since Trout is the author's alter-ego, the point of view is actually all the author's. This is an odd relationship between author and character and one that could degenerate into ego-stroking. However, this danger is avoided by the use of humor. Both Trout and the author become the butts of jokes more often than the other characters, most of whom are caricatures. Usually literature strives to flesh out characters to seem at least a little real, but for Vonnegut and Trout, this interferes with their ideas. The impact on the point of view is an illusion that two voices are telling the story, yet Trout and the author meld into one voice and a single point of view.

An additional illusion this style of point of view creates is that the author is simply carrying on a conversation with the reader. This is an illusion because the reader cannot provide any feedback, although many might in the form of margin notes while reading. Others could be stimulated to think more about the ideas presented, and nearly all who understand Vonnegut's humor would laugh aloud over certain passages.

## Setting

The setting of the science fiction story is in New York City. Two neighboring buildings, one housing the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the other a homeless shelter that once was the home of the Museum of the American Indian, are the focal points. Kilgore Trout lives in the homeless shelter while several of the minor characters frequent the Academy.

Through the various sub-stories that the author provides, other settings come into play. Scenes shift from Hitler's bunker at the end of World War II to a fifty-year anniversary meeting in Chicago for the bombing of Hiroshima. Whatever setting the sub-stories require are described in enough detail to shift to the time and place, but no more. The important clambake setting involves a beautiful starry night on the Atlantic coast of Rhode Island where handsomely dressed men and beautiful women intermingle. After the carnage of the timequake ending, the final scene at the clambake ends the story with a message of hope. Even when life becomes seemingly impossible to carry on, things will settle down and good times will return.



When the author leaves his writing nook to buy an envelope and mail pages to his typist, he willfully changes his personal setting in order to experience life more richly than if, by his wife's suggestion, he were to buy a thousand envelopes at once. This is one of his little adventures that makes life bearable. Included in this setting is the Postal Convenience Station. The author nurtures a secret love for the clerk there but she has no idea what he feels. Nevertheless, this setting becomes more interesting due to the romance involved, even if it is only imagined.

## Language and Meaning

The author uses simple sentence structures and a minimalistic style first introduced by Earnest Hemingway. Related to the journalistic style of writing, minimalism tells a story in the fewest number of words possible for a particular writer. Uncommon word choice may be done simply to put variety into the writing, or the writer might select a particular word because it conveys the intended meaning more succinctly than a string of simpler words. Vonnegut seems to employ both strategies for word choice.

One of the stylistic traits of the author's writing is to place taglines throughout the novel. Kilgore Trout likes to say, "Ting-a-ling!" quite often. Vonnegut likes to interject others such as, "Hold onto your hats!" Trout's expressions are explained, while the author's tend to be universally understood American English idioms, at least for the World War II generation.

Kurt Vonnegut is known for teaching creative writing in a straightforward manner. He disdains flowery expression and wordy explanations that never seem to get down on the point trying to be made. This is reflected in his language. He writes exactly what he intends to mean, although over-analysis might find something else. He pokes fun at this when Dudley Prince tries to find hidden meanings in Trout's discarded short stories. Those stories, like Vonnegut's, carry no intentional hidden meanings. They do propose ridiculous science fictions, such as a tiny sun the size of a pea around which a full-sized planet orbits, or a race of beings with one main characteristic. Yet by proposing the ridiculous, the truth about planet earth can be revealed, such as the planet that had a population so stupid as to go millions of years without realizing that another hemisphere existed. This was exactly the case for the eastern and western hemispheres of earth, whose populations were unaware of each other until explorations in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

## Structure

The story is split into sixty-three short chapters, amounting to two hundred and fourteen pages, including the prologue. A short epilogue that brings up the author's older brother expands the book by only five pages. The epilogue has little to do with the rest of the story, other than to honor the author's brother while getting in one last joke.

The short chapters often have more than one story included, making the actual science fiction story extremely short. The timequake happens, people go on autopilot for a



decade, and all kinds of mayhem breaks out at the end when free will kicks in again. Kilgore Trout steps up and becomes a hero of sorts. Then the clambake happens, and all is well with the world again.

This book had started out as a more fleshed-out story, but the author could not get it right. He abandoned most of the story as being rubbish unfit to publish, and then weaved in his own memoirs to make something worth reading. The result is arguably just a collection of somewhat related anecdotes pieced together without much thought to overall structure, yet with careful reading, the structure is tighter than this. Each little story combines with the overall tale to make one or more solid points. Rather than the incoherent ramblings of an old man, the story structure is closer to an epic poem than the typical science fiction novel. Furthermore, in good comedic fashion, the stories call forward and backward to jokes developed within the stories. The structure of this novel is a subtle weave that cannot be understood without paying close attention to how the comedic forms are used. Sometimes a joke is just a joke, while other times the joke establishes a theme carried throughout the story.

## Quotes

"That there are such devices as firearms, as easy to operate as cigarette lighters and as cheap as toaster, capable at anybody's whim of killing Father or Fats or Abraham Lincoln or John Lennon or Martin Luther King, Jr., or a woman pushing a baby carriage, should be proof enough for anybody that, to quote the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, 'being alive is a crock of shit'" (Chapter 1, pg. 2-3.)

"The moral at the end of that story is this: 'Men are jerks. Women are psychotic'" (Chapter 6, pg. 19.)

"In the slaving search for subversive literature on the shelves of our public schools, which will never stop, the two most subversive tales of all remain untouched, wholly unsuspected. One is the story of Robin Hood. . . . And another . . . is the life of Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament" (Chapter 10, pg. 36.)

"When I took a job in Boston as an advertising copywriter, because I was broke, an account executive asked me what kind of name Vonnegut was. I said, 'German.' He said, 'Germans killed six million of my cousins'" (Chapter 12, pg. 43.)

"When Trout returned to the shelter, though, the armed guard Dudley Prince...retrieved the manuscript. He wanted to know what it was a bag lady, with every reason to commit suicide, one would think, had deep-sixed so ecstatically" (Chapter 15, pg. 54.)

"I spoke at a Humanist Association memorial service for Dr. Asimov a few years back. I said, 'Isaac is up in Heaven now.' That was the funniest thing I could have said to an audience of Humanists" (Chapter 21, pg. 73.)

"I will say, too, that lovemaking, if sincere, is one of the best ideas Satan put in the apple she gave to the serpent to give to Eve. The best idea in that apple, though, is making jazz" (Chapter 24, pg. 84.)

"To quote from Kilgore Trout's story 'Empire State,' which is about a meteor the size and shape of the Manhattan skyscraper, approaching Earth point-first at a steady fifty-four miles an hour: 'Science never cheered up anyone. The truth about the human situation is just too awful'" (Chapter 31, pg. 105.)

"All male writers, incidentally, no matter how broke or otherwise objectionable, have pretty wives. Somebody should look into this" (Chapter 34, pg. 115.)

"I went to college in faraway Ithaca, New York, instead of going to work for The Indianapolis Times. Ever since, I, like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Chapter 40, pg. 133.)

"His sister, my aunt Irma, said to me one time when I was grownup, 'All Vonnegut men are scared to death of women.' Her two brothers were sure as heck scared of her" (Chapter 47, pg. 157.)

"This is the point I want to make, though: Frankenstein's monster was unhappy and destructive, whereas the people Trout energized in the neighborhood of the Academy, although most of them wouldn't have won any beauty contests, were by and large cheerful and public-spirited" (Chapter 53, pg. 177.)

"As the curtain descended, there was a sob backstage. It wasn't in the playbook. It was ad lib. It was about beauty. It came from Kilgore Trout" (Chapter 61, pg. 203.)

"This was his finale: 'I have thought of a better word than awareness,' he said. 'Let us call it soul'" (Chapter 63, pg. 214.)



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the relationship between Kurt Vonnegut and his fictional character, Kilgore Trout.

What is a timequake?

What happens after the timequake ends?

What does the author mean by humanism?

Why does Kilgore Trout throw away his short stories?

Why does Kilgore Trout consider human awareness to be the fastest moving thing in the universe?

Why does the author still admire certain socialistic ideals?

Describe the author's relationship with science and education.