

A GUIDE TO *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Kurt Vonnegut

So it goes.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Slaughterhouse-Five is a postmodern antiwar novel that jumps around in time and place, using an unusual mixture of fiction, nonfiction, and science fiction. Veering from comedy to tragedy to irony, Vonnegut attempts to present the chaos of contemporary experience and our search for the meaning of life and death.

Settings: Europe (especially Dresden, Germany) in 1944–1945; New York, New England, and the imaginary planet Tralfamadore in 1967–1968.

Protagonist: Billy Pilgrim, first as a young American prisoner of war who witnesses the Allied bombing of Dresden and later as an optometrist and family man in New York, a patient in a Vermont hospital, and a human specimen in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore. His name suggests that he is engaged in a spiritual journey.

Conflicts: External conflict pitting Billy and other Americans against the Germans during World War II; external conflict pitting Billy against Roland Weary, who blames Billy for his death; internal conflict of the narrator as he struggles to express the meaning of the war experience while unable to resort to conventional storytelling elements.

Resolution: After the defeat of Germany in World War II, Billy returns home and finds moments of peace and escape. Roland Weary, on the other hand, dies of gangrene on the way to prison camp. Vonnegut succeeds in writing a book that expresses the disjointedness of his experience and his sense of moral outrage.

Major Themes: War is an unspeakable horror for which there can be no justification. The artist's imagination can help people come to grips with the purpose of life and the meaning of death.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The vocabulary of *Slaughterhouse-Five* should pose no problems for upper-level students, although some may need help with the historical background of World

War II. While the form of the novel may prove difficult for some students, keeping careful notes on Billy's time-travels may help. Although the novel's key event—the bombing of Dresden—is never described, its physical and psychological aftermath dominates the tone of the book and may disturb some students. Despite the grim details and the inclusion of some profanity and sexual situations, the writer's moral stance is never abandoned. On the contrary, Vonnegut clearly hopes that Billy's experiences will help contemporary readers realize the absurdity of war and ultimately create a more humane social order.

BACKGROUND

World War II. Students may need to review some of the basic facts about this global conflict. World War II began on September 1, 1939, when Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland. Germany, Japan, and Italy were the Axis powers. The Axis was opposed by the Allies—Great Britain, France, and later the Soviet Union and the United States, which entered the war in December 1941, after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. At first the German armies overran much of Europe. However, the tide eventually turned. The invasion of Normandy by the Allies on D-day—June 6, 1944—marked the beginning of the final Allied push to victory. Germany surrendered in May 1945, and Japan followed suit in August 1945, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. It has been estimated that sixty million people died in the war.

Battle of the Bulge. This is the battle in which Billy Pilgrim is involved and which leads to his capture by the Germans. A last German counteroffensive began in December 1944, as the German army advanced through the forest of the Ardennes to Belgium. Although the Germans created a temporary “bulge” in the Allied lines, they were eventually forced to retreat in early 1945 with heavy losses.

Dresden. Long a center of both culture and manufacturing, the city of Dresden is in east-central Germany. Renowned for its architecture and called “Florence on the Elbe,” it comprised a magnificent gathering of Baroque and rococo buildings, along with some of the finest museums in the world. As Vonnegut explains in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Dresden had been declared an

open city during the war. (In international law, an open city, although a military objective, is demilitarized. Thus left open to enemy occupation, it receives immunity from attack.) So Dresden should have been a safe haven, yet it was devastated by Allied bombing in 1945. Vonnegut provides one reason for the bombing in his quote of a U.S. Air Force lieutenant general in Chapter Nine: “. . . V-1’s and V-2’s [rockets] were at the very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women, and children indiscriminately. . . .”

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Like the writer of the great seventeenth-century allegory, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Vonnegut has given several characters unusual and suggestive names.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the author himself; narrator of the first and last chapters, struggling to find a way of expressing his war experience.

Bernard V. O’Hare, an old war buddy of Vonnegut’s with whom he returns to Dresden.

Gerhard Müller, a Dresden cabdriver who was held as a prisoner of war by the Americans; one of the people to whom the novel is dedicated.

Mary O’Hare, O’Hare’s wife, who thinks Vonnegut plans to glamorize the war; Vonnegut pledges to her that the book will not be heroic and dedicates the novel to her also.

Billy Pilgrim, a young American prisoner of war who witnesses the Allied bombing of Dresden. After the war he becomes an optometrist, engages in time-travel, and is taken against his will to the planet Tralfamadore, where he is displayed as a typical human specimen in a zoo. His name suggests a pilgrimage of the human spirit, a search for meaning.

Montana Wildhack, former movie star with whom Billy is mated in the zoo on Tralfamadore.

Eliot Rosewater, a former infantry captain; a science fiction fan whom Billy meets in the veterans’ hospital.

Kilgore Trout, an obscure science fiction writer who becomes Billy’s friend and favorite author; some of his plots bear a strange resemblance to Billy Pilgrim’s experiences.

Valencia Merble, Billy’s wife, who dies while on her way to visit Billy in the hospital.

PLOT

Chapter One. The first-person **narrative voice** of Kurt Vonnegut establishes the **frame story** and describes the **internal conflict** he experienced as he struggled to write the book we are reading. Using a postmodern device, he asserts that the events more or less actually happened, indicating that the novel will be a complex blend of fiction and nonfiction. The narrator shifts back and forth between his prewar life and his return to

Dresden in 1967 with an old war buddy, Bernard V. O’Hare. In addition, he interlaces his failed attempts to write this book using a conventional approach—that is, with suspense building to a climax. Descriptions of his postwar life with his wife and children follow, and we learn of his late-night attempts to telephone old friends.

Mary O’Hare angrily accuses the narrator of planning to glamorize war. He promises not to do so and to title the book *The Children’s Crusade*. This title would serve as homage to the terrible thirteenth-century European expedition—intended to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims—which resulted in some thirty thousand child crusaders drowned or sold into slavery. Vonnegut asserts that this book is a failure, presumably because no book can adequately embody his experience. Nevertheless, with Chapter Two, he stops the frame story and begins the **inner story**.

Chapter Two. Vonnegut now changes to the third-person **point of view** and introduces the **main character**. He also establishes the novel’s usual means of **characterization**, which is to show a character in action or relate what happens to a character rather than to reveal his or her private thoughts and feelings. The **plot** begins but is not presented in chronological sequence. The **unity** of the book resides in the composite experience of Billy Pilgrim, regardless of the specific order of events. In many ways, the novel is like a dream or a movie.

In the opening **exposition**, we learn that Billy Pilgrim was born in 1922 and grew up in Ilium, New York. (Vonnegut is playing on the name of Troy, New York. Ilium is the Latin name of Troy, an ancient city in Asia Minor and the main setting for Homer’s Trojan War epic, the *Iliad*. There is also a suggestion that Billy is like Odysseus, who embarks on an epic journey [described in Homer’s *Odyssey*] after the Trojan War.) Billy was drafted, became an optometrist, and suffered a nervous collapse. After receiving shock treatment in a veterans’ hospital, he married in 1948, fathered two children, and prospered. He survived a 1968 plane crash, after having been kidnapped in 1967 and taken to the planet Tralfamadore. There he was mated with a former movie star named Montana Wildhack. Like Tralfamadoreans, Billy believes that past, present, and future exist simultaneously and that death is simply a temporary bad moment. At every mention of a death, the narrator simply says, “So it goes.” This **repetition** contributes to the novel’s ironic **tone**—a sort of unwilling acceptance of mortality. From this expression a **theme** emerges: Death must be accepted, but we should never accept inhumanity.

As Billy’s history continues, he survives the Battle of the Bulge in 1944–1945, later wandering the European countryside with two scouts and a gunner named Roland Weary. He becomes “unstuck in time,” experiencing scenes of death, pre-birth, youth, a 1965 visit to his mother, a 1958 banquet, and a 1961 party. After Weary snaps him back into 1944, the scouts abandon them. Filled with disgust, Weary attacks Billy, but they are interrupted by German soldiers.

Chapter Three. Billy and Weary are taken with other prisoners to a cottage, where Billy time-travels to his optometrist's office in 1967. He returns briefly to 1944 when his prisoner picture is taken. Abruptly he then jumps back to 1967, driving through an urban landscape that reminds him of Dresden and attending a speech by a Marine who supports the war in Vietnam. Upon returning home, Billy time-travels to Luxembourg in December 1944. With other American prisoners, he is packed into a boxcar. Finally, he time-travels to the night in 1967 on which he was kidnapped and taken to Tralfamadore.

Chapter Four. On the night of his daughter's wedding in 1967, Billy is taken away in a flying saucer. En route to Tralfamadore, he time-travels back again to the boxcar; there Roland Weary dies, blaming Billy and vowing revenge. After ten days in the boxcar, the prisoners are unloaded at a prison camp, given overcoats, and deloused. Other prisoners include Edgar Derby, a teacher, and Paul Lazzaro, a car thief who has vowed to avenge Weary's death. As the prisoners shower, Billy time-travels back to his infancy, to a golf game, and back to the spaceship. In a key statement of **theme**, a Tralfamadorian explains to Billy that all time is simultaneous and that only Earthlings speak of free will.

Chapter Five. On the spaceship, Billy reads a Tralfamadorian novel that sounds remarkably like *Slaughterhouse-Five*—messages seen all at once, with “no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects.” Following time-travels to a terrifying childhood vacation, Billy jumps back to the delousing station. This time the Americans are greeted by hearty English prisoners who treat them to a banquet and entertain them with a play, *Cinderella*. Suddenly Billy becomes hysterical; he is tied down in the prison hospital and watched over by Edgar Derby.

From his bed, Billy time-travels to a veterans' hospital in 1948, where he meets Eliot Rosewater, a former infantry captain who introduces him to the writings of Kilgore Trout—an event that turns out to be a major plot **complication**. As Billy wakes up back in the prison camp hospital next to Edgar Derby, an English colonel talks to him and refers to the war as the Children's Crusade. Billy then shifts to the veterans' hospital, where he talks about a Kilgore Trout novel in which a visitor from outer space provides Earthlings with a new Gospel. From there, we time-travel to the zoo on Tralfamadore as Billy is put on display in a simulated Earth habitat under a transparent geodesic dome. He remarks that he is about as happy as he was on Earth and that he is amazed that an entire planet can live in peace. Time-traveling several times between his wedding night and the prison hospital, he eventually wakes up in 1968 in Ilium, where he is berated by his daughter. Then he time-travels back to the zoo, where Montana Wildhack has just been brought from Earth to be his mate. After her initial terror, Montana

comes to love and trust Billy. In a telling scene, he jumps to 1968 and tries to return to work—but he is considered insane.

Chapter Six. Billy wakes in the prison hospital and listens to Lazzaro telling him of his plans for sadistic revenge, which include his repeated vow to have Billy killed. Billy has recorded a description of his own death in Chicago on February 13, 1976: He gives a speech, is shot, and “experiences death for a while.” He then “swings back into life again,” in the prison hospital in 1945. In need of shoes, Billy acquires the silver boots used by the Cinderella character in the camp play. Vonnegut seems to use the shoes as a **symbol** of innocence confronted by harsh reality. The American prisoners are then shipped in boxcars to Dresden and moved into a slaughterhouse.

Chapter Seven. Early in 1968, on his way to an optometrists' convention, Billy survives a plane crash. He is taken to a hospital, where he lies unconscious for two days. During this time he time-travels to his first night in the slaughterhouse, where he is guarded by a young boy named Werner Gluck.

Chapter Eight. Howard Campbell, an American-turned-Nazi, comes to the slaughterhouse to recruit prisoners for a military unit called the Free American Corps. Praising American ideals, Edgar Derby stands up to Campbell and predicts the defeat of Nazism as the air raid sirens begin to howl. The Americans, along with their guards and Campbell, take shelter in an underground meat locker. Meanwhile, Billy time-travels to Ilium, where his daughter argues with him about Kilgore Trout. Billy has become a friend of Trout, who attends a party for Billy's eighteenth wedding anniversary, where Trout talks about fiction and God. Billy grows distraught when a barbershop quartet—reminding him of his Dresden guards—sings “That Old Gang of Mine.” Retreating, he remembers the night spent in the meat locker. When the prisoners and their guards emerge after the firestorm, the city looks like the moon, with everyone dead. Back in the Tralfamadore zoo, Montana, six months pregnant, asks Billy to tell her a story. He tells her the story of Dresden.

Chapter Nine. In Vermont in 1968, Billy's wife, Valencia, dies on her way to visit him in the hospital. Billy shares a room with Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a professor writing a history of the Army Air Corps in World War II. Rumfoord's wife, Lily, reads aloud President Truman's statement on using an atomic bomb to destroy Hiroshima. During the time in which Valencia is buried and his son, Robert, returns from the Vietnam War, Billy time-travels from the hospital.

Chapter Ten. As in Chapter One, the first-person narrator of this chapter is Vonnegut himself, who returns us to the **frame story**. He tells us that Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated two nights earlier and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., a month before that. (In fact, King was killed *two* months earlier, thus

throwing the book's factual accuracy into question in an obvious way. How many other basic facts are inaccurate or untrue? Is Vonnegut telling the truth about himself?)

Vonnegut recalls the pleasant plane trip back to Dresden and his volunteer work as a corpse miner in the ruins. He leaves readers with a **symbol** of the war's cruelty and absurdity. Amid the devastation, he tells us, Edgar Derby was executed for stealing a teapot. After the war ended, spring arrived and the birds asked their meaningless question, "Poo-tee-weet?" The novel ends without a conventional **resolution**. However, the reader realizes that the existence of the book itself is a moral victory for its author and thus a sign of hope.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating the Historical Background

The central themes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* grow out of Vonnegut's personal response to historical events. Students might explore the following historical topics:

- causes and effects of the medieval Children's Crusade and its relationship to Billy's pilgrimage
- causes and effects—military, political, cultural, and personal—of the firebombing of Dresden
- justifications given for the Vietnam War and reasons for the protests against it

2. Comparing the Novel with Other Books and with Films

Individual projects and discussion groups might focus on specific comparisons and contrasts:

- How is Vonnegut's depiction of war like or unlike Stephen Crane's in "A Mystery of Heroism" or *The Red Badge of Courage*?
- In what way is Billy Pilgrim like or unlike the main character in Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" or Tim O'Brien's "Speaking of Courage"?
- Compare and contrast the journey of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* with that of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
- Compare and contrast the novel and the film *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

3. Extending the Novel

Individual students or discussion groups might extend ideas of the novel:

- What recent movies or television specials use the

device of time-travel? How is the device used in comedy, tragedy, satire, romance, or another genre?

- Describe the novel's attitude toward war, citing supporting passages. Is this attitude toward war common today? Do students share this attitude, or do they feel differently about war?
- Compare and contrast the tone and visual style of the movie version of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972) with those of other antiwar films, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), *M*A*S*H** (1970), and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987).

MEET THE WRITER

Kurt Vonnegut (1922–) was born in Indianapolis. He attended Cornell University before joining the army. After World War II, he earned a master's degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago. As he states in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he was captured after the Battle of the Bulge and witnessed the Dresden bombing while hidden in an underground meat locker. In the late 1940s, Vonnegut worked as a reporter and in public relations before embarking on a distinguished career as a writer of short stories, novels, and nonfiction. His best-known works include *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), generally considered his masterpiece. Its publication established Vonnegut as a spokesman for a generation that opposed war and violence.

READ ON

William Cullen Bryant, "Thanatopsis." A meditation on death and the meaning it gives to life.

Stephen Crane, "A Mystery of Heroism." A short story that explores the surprising causes and effects of wartime behavior.

Ernest Hemingway, "Soldier's Home." A short story about a young man who returns home after the trauma of World War I.

John Hersey, *Hiroshima*. The gripping and influential nonfiction account of the explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima in 1945.

Tim O'Brien, "Speaking of Courage." A short story about a recently returned Vietnam veteran, searching for the meaning of his experience.

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