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Slaughterhouse - Five

by

**Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
1969**



MonkeyNotes Edited by PinkMonkey Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTINGS

A large portion of the action of the story occurs in the small town of Ilium, New York, where Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the novel, was born. Having grown up in Ilium, he settles there after fighting in World War II. He also becomes an optometrist, marries, and raises two children in Ilium.

Germany is another important setting in the book, particularly the city of Dresden, which is located in the southeastern portion of the country. During the war, Billy is sent to Dresden, a civilian city of.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Character

Billy Pilgrim – an unassuming man from Ilium, New York, who allows fate to control him. He serves in World War II, where he lives through the bombing of Dresden, which greatly affects him. After the war, he returns to Ilium, where he settles down, becomes an optometrist, marries, and has.....

Minor Characters

Vonnegut – the author himself appears as a character in the novel. In the first and last chapters, Vonnegut tells about himself, the story he is writing, and what led him to write it. It becomes obvious that.....

Bernard V. O'Hare – an old war buddy of Vonnegut. They were both privates and infantry scouts during World War II. They visit Dresden again together after the war.

Mary O'Hare – the wife of Bernard. She is totally against war and its glorification through.....

Gernard Muller – a friendly cab driver in East Germany. He takes Billy and O'Hare around Dresden on their return trip and shows them the slaughterhouse where they.....

Paul Lazzaro – an American soldier who promises Roland Weary that he.....

Many additional characters are identified in the complete study guide

CONFLICT

Protagonist: The protagonist of the novel is Billy Pilgrim, a mild mannered man who takes life as it comes, without complaining and without trying to control it. Although he becomes a successful optometrist, marries Valencia, and has two children, he never really takes charge of his life. Instead, he allows fate to control him and time traveling to direct him. When the Trafalmadorians come to.....

Antagonist: Billy's antagonist is really himself. He is too weak to control his life; instead, he allows fate to rule his existence. Although he has the ability to time travel, he does nothing to.....

Climax: The climax occurs when Billy is shot before he ever masters his fate or convinces others of his captivity on Trafalmore or his ability to time travel to.....

Outcome: The story ends in tragedy. Billy, never able to fully take control of his.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The plot of the book is multi-fold and complicated. First and foremost, it tells of Billy Pilgrim's experiences during World War II, including his capture by the Germans and subsequent imprisonment, in a somewhat chronological manner. Mixed in with the war story are events that occur in Billy's life, both before and after

the war; many of them are told as Billy time travels to the past and to the future. It is learned that Billy leads a somewhat ordinary life in Ilium, New York. He is a reasonably successful optometrist and has an unattractive wife and two children (a son and a daughter). In addition to telling about Billy's present life and his war experiences, his experience of being kidnapped by aliens is chronicled; he is captured, placed in a flying saucer, and taken to Trafalmadore, where Billy is displayed in a zoo.

The novel begins with Billy serving as an American soldier in World War II. While fighting behind enemy lines, he is captured by the Germans. After his release, he is assigned to work hard labor in Dresden, Germany. During his stay, the city is destroyed by an Allied air raid. Billy and a.....

THEMES

Major Theme - The major theme of the book is the role of fate in life. Billy never seizes control of his existence, but allows himself to be ruled by chance. When he begins to time travel, he does nothing to try and control when or where he is taken on his journeys. Knowing he is to be kidnapped, he goes out to meet the Trafaladorians, offering no resistance. While on Tralfamadore, he accepts.....

Minor Theme - The minor theme of the novel is the inhumanity of war, as seen in.....

MOOD

For all its surface nonchalance and its unemotional stating of events, the mood of the book is one of strong and controlled tragic emotions pulsating just beneath the surface. Billy Pilgrim is constantly grappling with the past, trying to forget the horrors of Dresden that have haunted him for.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born into a prominent family on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. His father and grandfather were both architects. In addition, his family members were known for being pacifists and atheists, two philosophies that shape Vonnegut's thinking and writing.

Vonnegut was educated in Indianapolis. In high school, he was a good student and served as a reporter for his school paper, the Daily Echo. In 1940, he graduated and went to Cornell University, where he studied biochemistry and wrote for the college paper. Before graduation and in spite of his pacifist background, he volunteered for military service in 1943 because of World War II. He served in the infantry and participated in the Allied invasion of Europe. Like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he was captured by the Nazis and imprisoned in Dresden. He was in the city when Dresden was bombed and destroyed.

After the war, Vonnegut attended the University of Chicago, studying anthropology and working part-time as a reporter. He also married Jane Cox, his childhood sweetheart. He quit college when his master's thesis was not accepted and went to work for General Electric in Schenectady, New York. After working for three years as a public relations employee, he quit in 1950 to devote himself to his.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Slaughterhouse-Five is largely set during World War II. It focuses on the capture of American soldiers by the Germans in 1945 during the Battle of Bugle. The captured men are taken to Dresden to work in hard labor. On February 13, 1945, Dresden is destroyed by an allied air raid. All the inhabitants of the city, except for a few American prisoners and their German guards, are annihilated. The survivors were later used to dig through the rubble for corpses and to begin the clean-up of the city. This factual background information is a key to understanding the book and the core around which the other sub-plots revolve.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a sophisticated novel that mixes surrealism, science fiction, dark comedy, philosophic meditation, and impressionistic imagery. It also contains elements of autobiography, documentary, and fantasy. The documentary and the fantastic often appear in the form of.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

Chapter 1

Summary

As an introduction to the novel, Vonnegut, the author, appears as a character in the first chapter to tell about the story he is writing and about the events that led to the novel. He informs the reader that the story is based mainly on real events, but it also contains fictionalized accounts. He reveals that he has been obsessed for years with writing a book about the bombing of Dresden, but he has found the task very difficult.

Vonnegut enlisted the help of one of his friends, Bernard V. O'Hare, to help him remember the events that occurred in the war, for the two of them fought together. He assures O'Hare's wife, Mary, that his book is not a glamorized version of the war. She tries to persuade him to name the book *The Children's Crusade*, to show its non-violent philosophy. In the end, he dedicates the book to Mary O'Hare and Gerhard Miller, a taxi driver who showed him around Dresden when the author and Bernard O'Hare visited it during peacetime.

Notes

In the first chapter, which serves as an introduction, Vonnegut directly addresses the reader, pointing out that the book is based on events that really occurred. He experienced first-hand the destruction of Dresden during the war, an event that he has never been able to put out of his mind. For twenty-three years, he has wanted to write about it.

Vonnegut's attitude towards war becomes clear in this first chapter. He sees it as a totally futile occurrence, but he is resigned to the fact that war will always exist. He feels that wars have taught people insensitivity towards death. He cites the detached attitude of a woman writer as she relayed the news of a young veteran's dying. He finds such a blasé, uncaring attitude repulsive in any human being. Vonnegut then points out the irony in the fact that war tries to fight violence with more violence. He also questions the American government's treatment of violence as a "top secret" affair that is not to be discussed.

When faced with Mary O'Hare's anger about war, Vonnegut assures her that his book will not glorify violence. Her main concern is the death of "babies" who will grow up and die in war. Along with his assurance to her, he also considers calling the book, "The Children's Crusade." The author has tried to pass on his knowledge of the futility of destruction to his children. He wants the younger generation to understand what the older ones have always failed to.

Vonnegut revisits Dresden with O'Hare, and this, along with the completion of this book, is of great importance to him. With these two things he has managed to free himself of his obsession. He says, "People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore."

Chapter 2

Summary

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time, traveling through time warps with no control over where he is going next. It has not always been that way. As a result, this chapter gives background information on Billy's life. Explanations are given about his childhood, his time in the army, and his career as an optometrist. There is also an explanation of his head injury. Billy was in an airplane crash in 1968, wounding his head in the accident. In the same year, his wife died, further complicating his life. After her death, Billy went public on the radio about coming unstuck in time. He also wrote to the newspaper about being kidnapped by aliens. His daughter feels

that his head injury has made him senile prematurely; she threatens to place him in an old folks' home.

Billy first comes unstuck in time in 1944, during World War II. He is behind enemy lines with three other Americans. As they try to make their way to safety, Billy is too weak to go; however, one of the other Americans, Roland Weary, bullies him along. As he painfully moves, he begins to time travel – to his past and to his future. Billy is moving so slowly that two of the soldiers, the scouts, leave Billy and Roland behind, fearing the approach of the enemy. Ironically, the scouts are killed, while Billy and Roland survive.

Still Roland is angry and blames Billy for causing the scouts to leave; therefore, Roland starts hitting him. He then realizes that they are being watched by German soldiers.

Notes

The book's main character, Billy Pilgrim, is introduced in this chapter, and a chronological summary of his earthly life is given. There was nothing extraordinary about his growing up or youth. In fact, there was never anything extraordinary about Billy until he became "unstuck in time." Now he claims he has also been kidnapped by aliens. Since Billy's public claims about time-travel and aliens occur after his plane crash, the people around him, especially his daughter, believe his fantastic stories are caused by brain damage from the head injury he sustained in the crash.

Billy is a harmless person who seems to merely exist, with little will of his own. Even when things happen to him that he does not like, he refuses to assert himself. During the war, he allowed Roland to bully him along. When he time travels, he has no input as to whether he goes, where he goes, or for how long he goes. As a result, Billy seems to be a weak character who is at the mercy of powerful forces that surround him and over which he has no control.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Billy Pilgrim - Billy is the protagonist and central character on whom the whole emphasis of the book is placed. The novel is really about four sides of Billy's life: 1) his past life as a soldier in World War II; 2) his present, uneventful life as a husband, father, and optometrist in Ilium, New York; 3) his time travels that take him into the past and into the future; and 4) his life as a prisoner on the distant planet of Trafalmore. Of the four parts of Billy's life, the greatest emphasis in the novel is placed on his life as a soldier, for it dominates both his past and his present.

Vonnegut's telling of Billy's war experiences in Germany is highly autobiographical. To make the reader totally aware of the similarities between his own experiences and those of his.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The structure of the novel is totally unconventional and does not really have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The story really begins around 1968 after Billy Pilgrim has survived the war and a nervous breakdown and has settled down in Ilium, New York as an optometrist. Almost immediately, however, Billy begins to time travel back to the past, especially to the war years around 1944, and into the future. Because of his time warps, he is even able to see ahead to his plane crash and his eventual assassination in 1976.

In the opening chapter, Vonnegut himself appears and reveals what the end of the novel will be. Then in the course of the narrative, there is constant movement between the future, past, and present in unpredictable ways. Although the war, the true central concern of the novel, was obviously.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

Major Theme - The major theme of the book is the significance of fate in life. Throughout the novel, Billy is controlled by chance, never trying to change the course of his life until the very end. He allows himself to be mistreated by Roland Weary, to become engaged to a fat, unattractive woman, to travel through time to the past and the future without any control, to be kidnapped by aliens and.....

Minor Theme - A subtitle of the novel describes it as “A Duty Dance with Death,” which seems most appropriate since there is a kind of sweeping circularity in its references to war and dying. The entire novel centers on the horror of the Dresden bombing, the needless death of thousands of innocent civilians, and the senseless futility of violence. Throughout the book, Billy and Vonnegut try.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Vonnegut appears in the novel as a character. How does this affect the novel and what the author is trying to say?
2. Billy’s life is depicted through flashbacks and time travels into the past and future. From what you have learned about him through these methods, write a chronological history of Billy’s life.....

END OF SAMPLE EXCERPTS

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