



Slaughterhouse-Five

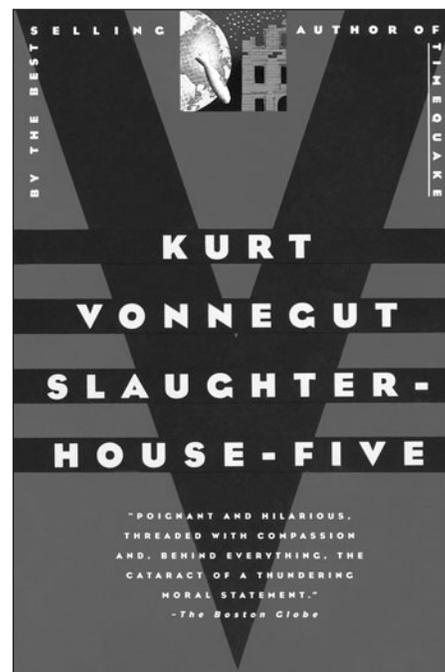
Written by Kurt Vonnegut

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READING LEVEL: 9



• note to teachers •

Slaughterhouse-Five is the semi-autobiographical account of the fire bombing of Dresden, Germany by the British and American air forces in the February of 1945. The destruction of this non-military city so late in the war is still very controversial, and that controversy is central to Vonnegut's book.

• historical background •

By February of 1945, Dresden was one of the few major German cities that had not been bombed in the Allied campaign to break German morale by targeting entire cities and towns. It had become a major refuge for civilians fleeing the advance of the Soviet Army across Eastern Europe. It was also the home of American POWs who, like Vonnegut, had been captured during the Battle of the Bulge. Although there were no obvious military targets in Dresden, allied commanders later suggested that the city was an important communications link between the German armies in eastern and western Europe. Critics of the raid maintain that the lack of military significance and the inflated population were reasons not to target Dresden. Some historians suggest that the fire-bombing of Dresden was ordered as revenge for the V-2 rocket attacks on London late in the war.

The raid was carried out over three days, with the Royal Air Force leading the first wave with incendiary bombs that created a firestorm in the city. Over the next two days, the American Air Force followed up with strafing raids on the survivors. No accurate casualty reports exist because of the firestorm, but estimates range from a low of thirty-five thousand deaths (the figure offered by the Allies) to over one hundred thousand (the figure offered by the Germans). Regardless of the actual number of casualties, the firebombing of Dresden obviously ranks with the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as atrocities of World War II.

• about the book

Published at the height of the Vietnam War in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is considered by many critics to be Vonnegut's greatest work. It includes all of the elements that readers expect from Vonnegut: humor, satire, social criticism, and pacifism. The novel is the result of what Vonnegut describes as a twenty-three year struggle to write a book about the firebombing of Dresden, Germany which he witnessed as an American POW incarcerated in a former slaughterhouse. Perhaps not surprisingly, Vonnegut emerged from the experience an avowed pacifist.

Students who are unfamiliar with Vonnegut's work may find the format of the novel a bit disconcerting. Vonnegut combines science fiction, autobiography, historical fiction, and modern satire in a "jumbled" depiction of the life of Billy Pilgrim. Billy, like Vonnegut, experiences the destruction of Dresden, and, as with Vonnegut, it is the defining moment of his life. Unlike the author, he also experiences time travel or coming "unstuck in time," and abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. Because of Billy's unique view of time, the story is told through a seemingly random recounting of the events of Billy's life. Thus, the reader comes "unstuck in time" along with Billy.

In 1969, the United States was reeling from the growing violence of the anti-war and civil rights movements. The country had witnessed the assassination of two leaders who were considered icons of peace and hope for a better society, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. It is not surprising that in this atmosphere, Vonnegut's novel gained an almost cult-like following among the generation that rejected what it saw as the materialism and shallowness of American society. Billy Pilgrim's apparent acceptance of fate—he responds to every mention of death with the phrase "so it goes"—actually illustrates Vonnegut's opposition to blind acceptance of socially acceptable cruelty. This opposition is illustrated in his depiction of the massacre at Dresden, and in Barbara's joy in stripping her father of his dignity "in the name of love."

Slaughterhouse-Five remains an effective indictment of the least attractive characteristics of human society. Ultimately, Vonnegut's criticisms are still valid in the twenty-first century.

• about the author

KURT VONNEGUT was a self-described "fourth-generation German-American...who...witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany...and survived to tell the tale." He was a member of what Tom Brokaw has immortalized as "the greatest generation" who experienced childhood during the Great Depression, young adulthood during World War II, and who saw its values challenged in the Sixties and Seventies.

Vonnegut was born in 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana. His family suffered financial losses during the Depression, a fact that led to his mother's eventual suicide. While a student, he wrote for both his high school and college newspapers. He attended Cornell University and the Carnegie Institute of Technology (Carnegie-Mellon), before enlisting in the army. In 1944, he was captured at the Battle of Bulge and imprisoned in Dresden, Germany. In February of 1945, the Allies bombed the city of Dresden, destroying most of the city and killing tens of thousands.

After the war, Vonnegut married and worked in journalism and public relations. His first works were published in the 1950s, but were dismissed as lightweight science fiction. He finally achieved critical acclaim with the publication of *Cat's Cradle*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the 1960s. The anti-war themes of Vonnegut's work made him particularly popular with the counter-culture movement of the Vietnam Era.

Vonnegut's last book, a collection of autobiographical essays entitled *A Man Without A Country*, was published in 2005. He died due to injuries from a fall in 2007.

• teaching ideas

Slaughterhouse-Five is appropriate for study in high school or college English, creative writing, or history classes. In any genre-based English class, the novel can be used as an example of the use of plot, character, and setting to communicate the theme. The text can also be useful in a study of literary techniques such as irony and satire. Obviously, the novel would be appropriate in American literature classes as an example of modern American literature and a reflection of the historical context in which the work was produced.

Students of the art of writing can benefit from an analysis of the mechanics of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut's use of repetition, humor, and vernacular give his work a unique flavor. The style in which the book is written, moving from one time and place to another with no apparent organization, illustrates the view of time that Vonnegut seeks to present. Vonnegut also introduces many new techniques in his writing that no doubt influence other writers.

Students of history can also benefit from the historical aspects of the novel. Although it is disjointed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides a realistic account of the experiences of an American POW and the devastation of the fire-bombing of Dresden, a seldom studied aspect of World War II. It is also a reflection of the social attitudes of the Vietnam era in which it was written. *Slaughterhouse-Five* can legitimately be used in a study of the authenticity of historical novels.

Because of the liberal use of mature language, sexual situations, and violence, *Slaughterhouse-Five* should be studied by older high school or college students.

• discussion and writing: comprehension

CHAPTER 1

The author discusses the false starts and dead ends that he experienced in his twenty-three year struggle to write a book about the fire bombing of Dresden which he experienced as a prisoner of the Germans at the end of World War II.

Identify vocabulary – Guggenheim money

Identify characters – author, Bernard V. O'Hare, Gerhard Muller, Harrison Starr, Edgar Derby, Paul Lazzaro, Mary O'Hare

1. What aspects of the book does the author insist really happened?
2. How did the author find O'Hare?
3. What souvenirs does he recall the American POWs bringing out of Germany?
4. What does the author do to entertain himself late at night? Why can't he sleep?
5. What did the author learn in college after the war?
6. What jobs did the author have after the war?
7. What fatal accident did he cover?
8. What difference does the author see in the veterans who "really fought" and the veterans who had office jobs? Why do you think this difference exists?
9. What response does the author get when he tries to get information about the Dresden raid from the Air Force?
10. Who originally said, "Eheu, fugaces labuntur anni"? What does this phrase mean in English?
11. Why is Mary "polite but chilly"?
12. What happened during the real Children's Crusade?
13. Why is the book "so short and jumbled and jangled"?
14. Why does the author say that the book "was written by a pillar of salt"?

• discussion and writing: comprehension (continued)

CHAPTER 2

The reader is introduced to the main character, Billy Pilgrim. The chapter introduces the concept of coming “unstuck in time” and tells the main events of Billy’s life, emphasizing the events leading up to his capture by the German army at the end of World War II.

Identify characters – Billy Pilgrim, Barbara, Robert, Roland Weary, Valencia

1. What does the author mean when he says that Billy “has come unstuck in time”?
2. What are the major events of Billy’s life depicted in this chapter?
3. What is Tralfamadore? What happens to Billy there?
4. How does Billy describe the Tralfamadorians?
5. What ability do the Tralfamadorians have that Earthlings do not?
6. What is the origin of the phrase, “so it goes”?
7. Describe Billy’s war experience up to his capture?
8. How is he captured? With whom?
9. When and how did Billy first come unstuck in time? Describe the experience.
10. Why does Weary try to beat Billy?

CHAPTER 3

Billy travels back and forth in time from his experiences as a POW in Europe to post-war Ilium, New York on the eve of his daughter’s wedding.

Identify vocabulary – “mopping up,” androgyne

Identify characters – Wild Bob

1. Describe the German force that captured Billy. What does that force tell us about Germany at the end of the war?
2. What happens to the scouts?
3. Why does the German photographer take a picture of Billy’s and Weary’s feet?
4. Why does the photographer stage a picture of Billy’s capture?
5. What are the two causes of the destruction that Billy drives through on his way to the Lions Club meeting?
6. What does Billy’s encounter with the Marine major tell us about Billy’s approach to life?
7. Why does the doctor tell Billy to take a nap everyday? What do you think caused Billy’s malady?
8. Describe the German reserves whom the captured Americans passed. How do they compare to the group that captured Billy?
9. Describe the conditions on the trains that transported the prisoners. Describe the car that housed the railroad guards.
10. Why does Vonnegut refer to the prisoners on the trains as “human beings”?

CHAPTER 4

Billy is captured by the Tralfamadorians on his daughter's wedding night. While being transported on their flying saucer, he travels in time back to the prisoner train in 1945 Germany.

Identify characters – Edgar Derby, Paul Lazzaro, the Tralfamadorians

1. What does Billy do to occupy his time before the aliens come?
2. How does the message of the war movie change when it is viewed backwards?
3. How is Billy lifted into the flying saucer?
4. How do the Tralfamadorians answer when Billy asks “why me?”
5. Why do the other POWs refuse to let Billy sleep near them?
6. What does Weary tell the other men in his car before he dies?
7. What processes do the Americans go through when they arrive at the camp?

CHAPTER 5

Billy continues to move in time between World War II, Tralfamadore, his time in the psychiatric ward of a veterans' hospital, and his marriage.

Identify vocabulary – rodomontades

Identify characters – Eliot Rosewater, Kilgore Trout, Valencia Merble, Mr. and Mrs. Lance Rumfoord, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Professor Bertram, Copeland Rumfoord

1. What does the way Tralfamadorians view the universe and Earthlings tell us about their concept of time?
2. Is there a similarity between the format of Vonnegut's novel and the description of Tralfamadorian novels? Explain.
3. Describe the English POWs that Billy and the Americans encounter.
4. What was the main ingredient of the candles and soap used at the welcoming dinner for the American POWs?
5. Why do the British POWs send Billy to the hospital shed?
6. What is Billy introduced to in the veterans' hospital?
7. Why does science fiction appeal to Billy and Rosewater?
8. Why is Billy upset by his mother?
9. In his novel, *The Gospel from Outer Space*, what does Kilgore Trout say is the message of the gospels? How do the aliens change that message?
10. Describe Billy's habitat in the Tralfamadorian zoo.
11. What do the Tralfamadorians suggest Earthlings should learn to do?
12. What epitaph does Billy think of on his wedding night?
13. What does Campbell write about American POWs in Germany?
14. Why does the widowed mother think Billy is “going crazy”?

• discussion and writing: comprehension (continued)

CHAPTER 6

Billy and the other American POWs are transferred to Dresden as contract labor. Billy describes his own death.

1. What is the source of the animal magnetism Billy feels in the prison hospital shed?
2. What does Lazzaro say is the sweetest thing in life? What story does he tell to prove his point?
3. What advice does Lazzaro give Billy?
4. How does Billy die?
5. What positive attributes of Dresden does the Englishman share with the American POWs?
6. How is Edgar Derby elected head American?
7. To what does the author compare his first view of Dresden?
8. Describe the Americans' arrival in Dresden.
9. Describe the Americans' "home away from home."

CHAPTER 7

While Billy is in a hospital in Vermont recovering from injuries sustained in a plane crash, he travels through time back to Dresden in 1945.

Identify characters – Werner Gluck

1. Describe the plane crash in which Billy is injured.
2. What do Billy, Gluck, and Derby discover in the first building they enter while looking for the slaughterhouse kitchen?
3. What does the war widow in the kitchen think of Billy, Gluck, and Derby?
4. What work was assigned to the Americans in Dresden?
5. How do the Americans get vitamins and minerals?

CHAPTER 8

Billy travels from the slaughterhouse to his meeting with Kilgore Trout, his anniversary party, and back to the fire bombing of Dresden.

Identify vocabulary – nacreous

Identify characters – Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Kilgore Trout, Maggie White, Montana Wildhack

1. Why does Campbell visit the American POWs?
2. How does Derby respond to Campbell?
3. How does Billy meet Trout?
4. What does Trout's story about robots say about the bombing of Dresden?
5. What two 'lies' does Trout tell Maggie White?
6. How does Billy react to the barbershop quartet? Why?
7. How does Billy describe Dresden after the fire-bombing?
8. What do the American fighter planes do after the fire-bombing?
9. What do the Americans find in the suburb of Dresden?

CHAPTER 9

While in the hospital in Vermont recovering from the plane crash, Billy discusses Dresden with another patient. He then travels in time to Dresden and to Tralfamadore.

Identify vocabulary – epigraph

Identify characters – Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, Lily Rumfoord

1. How does Valencia die?
2. What justifications and critiques of the fire-bombing of Dresden does Rumfoord read?
3. What did the old man in Billy's past think about old age?
4. How had the army improved Robert?
5. What is Professor Rumfoord's opinion of Billy?
6. What might Billy choose as his happiest moment? Why?
7. What is the only thing Billy cries about in the war?
8. Why is the epigraph of the book *Away In A Manger*?
9. What is Professor Rumfoord's opinion of the raid on Dresden?
10. What two acquaintances does Billy indirectly encounter in the "tawdry bookstore"? How?
11. What happens to Billy on the New York radio show?

CHAPTER 10

Billy and the other POWs are used by the Germans to exhume corpses after the fire-bombing.

1. What does the author describe as one of his nicest moments?
2. What does the author mean by the term *corpse mine*?
3. How does the Maori POW die?
4. What new technique for disposing of the corpses is devised?
5. Why do the Germans leave?
6. What does the bird say to Billy Pilgrim? Why?

• discussion

1. After reading the book, why do you think that Vonnegut dedicated his novel to Mary O'Hare and Gerhard Muller?
2. Why does Vonnegut choose to write a “jumbled and jangled” war book?
3. What is the significance of the phrase “so it goes”?
4. What is the significance of the bird cry “poo-tee-weet”?
5. Explain the subtitle, *The Children's Crusade or a Dirty Dance With Death*.
6. Discuss the major themes of *Slaughterhouse-Five*?
7. How does Vonnegut use time to communicate his themes?
8. Discuss the use of irony in the novel.
9. Are we intended to believe Billy's tales of Tralfamadore or are we, like Barbara, supposed to assume that Tralfamadore is a figment of Billy's post-brain-damaged imagination?

• class activities

1. Billy's life is presented in a “jumbled and jangled” fashion. Have students construct a timeline of the important events in Billy's life. Looking at the chronology, are there cause and effect relationships that explain Billy's character?
2. Research and report to the class on the history of Dresden, Germany before and after World War II, during the Cold War, and since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.
3. Draw a map of the city of Dresden in 1945 and indicate the areas targeted by the Allied raid.
4. Identify phrases, events, characters, etc. from the book that communicate Vonnegut's criticisms of post-World War II American society.
5. Using Vonnegut's descriptions, present character sketches (both visual and verbal) of the main characters. For example, what does the fact that he is a member of the John Birch Society tell us about Billy's father-in-law?
6. Research Vonnegut's military career, and use a plot map to compare it to Billy Pilgrim's.
7. Produce visual representations of the Tralfamadorians, their space ship, and Billy's home in the zoo on Tralfamadore.
8. Play a recording of *The Ballad of the Green Beret* by Barry Sadler. How does the image of the Green Beret portrayed in the song compare to the image presented by Vonnegut in his descriptions of Robert?

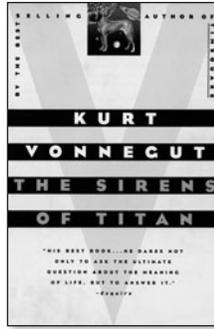
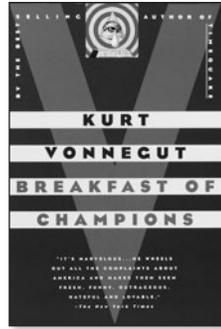
• beyond the book

1. The themes of free will and fatalism appear in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Research these concepts in other cultures and civilizations. What similarities and differences do you find?
2. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written at the height of the Vietnam War. How did Vonnegut's experiences at Dresden and America's involvement in Vietnam contribute to the anti-war message of the book?
3. Research opposing views of the fire-bombing of Dresden. Was it militarily necessary?
4. Research the arguments of the current movement against the war in Iraq. Are there similarities between these protesters' position and the attitudes expressed by Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*?
5. Interview veterans of World War II and other wars. How do their attitudes and experiences compare to Vonnegut's. What is universal in the experience of war? What varies depending on the specific conflict?
6. Examine Vonnegut's later publications of graphic illustrations. How do his illustrations promote the same themes as his novels?
7. Read descriptions of other atrocities of World War II such as *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Mila 18* by Leon Uris, and *The Winds of War and War and Remembrance* by Herman Wouk. Compare these events to the fire-bombing of Dresden.
8. Read other works by Vonnegut. What themes, settings, and characters run through his novels?
9. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is among the most frequently banned works in American literature. Why do you think this is the case? Research reactions to the book and compare it to reactions to other controversial works of art.
10. Vonnegut closes his last book, *A Man Without a Country*, with an original poem called "Requiem" which ends with these lines:

When the last living thing
has died on account of us,
how poetical it would be
if Earth could say,
in a voice floating up
perhaps
from the floor
of the Grand Canyon,
"It is done."
People did not like it here.

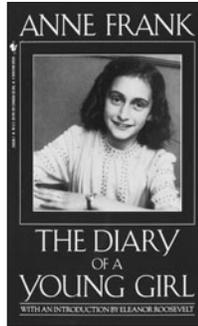
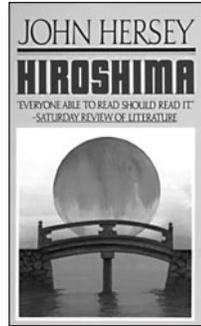
How does this poem communicate and reinforce the themes of *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

• for further reading



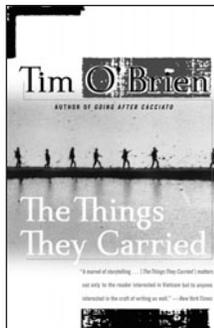
Other works by Kurt Vonnegut:

- Breakfast of Champions*
- Cat's Cradle*
- God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*
- The Sirens of Titan*
- Slapstick*
- Welcome to the Monkey House*

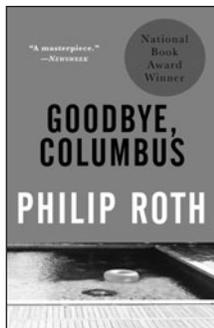
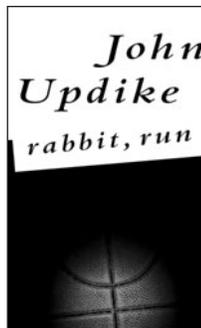


Works with similar themes:

- Hiroshima* by John Hersey
- The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank
- Mila 18* by Leon Uris
- Winds of War* by Herman Wouk



- War and Remembrance* by Herman Wouk
- All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque
- Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo
- The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
- Fox Girl* by Nara Okja Keller
- Catch-22* by Joseph Heller



- The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinski
- The Man In the Gray Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson
- Rabbit Run* by John Updike
- Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth

• about this guide's writer

SUSAN CORLEY teaches high school history in South Carolina. Her experience is with many different levels of students in grades 9-12. She has also taught high school English and served as an adjunct for local colleges.

• notes

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