

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Slaughterhouse Five

by Kurt Vonnegut

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Slaughterhouse Five

Background Lecture

The novel *Slaughterhouse Five* was written in 1968 during the Vietnam War, when the anti-war sentiment was just starting. This was also the year that both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. , and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, adding to the shock of violence. To express his protest against “the establishment” and the violence, Vonnegut told the story of his own war experience. Vonnegut had been a soldier and a prisoner of war in the last months of World War II. On the night of February 13, 1945, Dresden, Germany, was incinerated by Allied bombers; and 135,000 people died. Vonnegut, and other POW’s who were in Dresden in an underground shelter, saw the aftermath of the bombing which he described as a “desolate moonscape.”

Some other works by Vonnegut are the following:

Player Piano (1952)

The Sirens Of Titan (1959)

Mother Night (1961)

Cat’s Cradle (1963)

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965)

The novel *Slaughterhouse Five* is structured by “the Dresden experience.” In Chapter 1, Vonnegut speaks directly to you, the reader, and explains his writing of Dresden. Then, Vonnegut shifts point of view to third-person omniscient. He has a narrator tell the experience of a fictional character, Bill Pilgrim. Billy Pilgrim is not Vonnegut; he is a young soldier who experienced Dresden as a POW on the night it was bombed. In Chapter 2 the narrator gives you a short outline of the events of Bill’s life. This is helpful to the reader because the narrator, for the most part, follows Bill’s thoughts and memories which are not in the chronological order of his life. However, the chapters are in the chronological order of the six months that Billy spent as a soldier and POW in Europe. While following this basic six-month war sequence, the narrator inserts all of Bill’s memories of his life. Vonnegut uses the science fiction device of being “unstuck in time” to allow Billy to flip in and out of different memories at the same time he is going through the six-month war experience.

Slaughterhouse Five

Objectives

1. Students will recognize and appreciate the contemporary anecdotal style of the novel. Specifically, they will be able to identify the following about Vonnegut's stylistic use of
 - A. short, simple sentences and imagery to create a strong impact.
 - B. irony and satire.
 - C. allusions to reinforce his ideas.
 - D. shifting point of view. In chapters 1 & 10 the author speaks directly to the reader in the first person, and the chapter in between is told in third-person omniscient. On occasion, the third-person narration is interrupted by the first-person narrator to remind the reader that the story is really being told by the man who had the experience and is now much older.
 - E. a narrative structure that is not in chronological order but that follows the memories and fantasies of the main character, Billy Pilgrim. Because this novel does not follow the traditional plot structure of conflict, climax, and resolution, it is considered "unconventional."
2. Students will be able to describe each of the characters in the novel.
3. Students will recognize Vonnegut's image of confinement (a bug trapped in amber) as representative of the three settings where Billy is a prisoner of war, modern life & technology, and the Tralfamadorian's zoo exhibit.
4. Students will recognize and understand the following thematic ideas:
 - A. War inflicts horrifying suffering on people; and authoritarian systems allow this to happen.
 - B. Modern life with its emphasis on achievement offers no satisfaction for the individual.
 - C. Technology has turned humans into machines and dehumanized them.
 - D. Human beings are not in control of their lives; life is determined by outside forces. At the same time, however, Vonnegut is disturbed by the consequences of determinism. He points out that Darwin's idea of the strong having a better chance at survival can not imply that the strong are the only ones who should survive. This idea is brought out by the irony of Billy Pilgrim; Billy is weak and passive, yet he both survives and becomes a "success."
 - E. People should not be concerned with the ever-present threat of death because they remain alive in the events of their lives.
5. Students will write a reaction paper which summarizes one of Vonnegut's ideas and explains their reaction to it.

Slaughterhouse Five

Study Guide Student's Copy

Chapter 1

1. Why wasn't Vonnegut able to write about his experiences in Dresden for so many years?
2. Explain Vonnegut's reaction to the movie-maker's comment about anti-war books, "Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?"
3. Vonnegut seems to imply that machines have a destructive effect on humans. How does the image of the veteran in the elevator make that implication? Find a quote that relates the idea of machinery to the massacre of war.
4. What point does Mary O'Hare make about war stories? What is Vonnegut's reaction?
5. Vonnegut seems to see war as senseless, something humans should feel shame for doing. Find two things mentioned towards the end of Chapter 1 that support this statement of Vonnegut's view of war.

Chapter 3

1. In Chapter 1 Vonnegut tells the reader that he has promised Mary O'Hare that he will not make war glamorous. Give some details that show he is keeping this promise.
2. Throughout Chapter 3 Billy travels in time frequently. His mind seems to travel between the war and different experiences he has had in his life. As a result, there are two-story lines. One story line is of the war, and the other is Billy's life after the war. Which story line, although broken by the other story line, remains continuous, picking up and continuing from the same point each time?
3. In Chapter 2 you are told that the creatures on Tralfamadore "can look at all different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. They can see how permanent all moments are and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever." How is Billy like the Tralfamadorians? Do you think other people think like Billy does? If so, in what way?
4. Stream-of-consciousness is a technique that writers use to duplicate the thinking process of people. We think in a process of association; one idea triggers another thought, which in turn reminds us of something else and so on. How is Vonnegut using the technique of stream-of-consciousness with Billy? Give an example of the process of association in Billy's thinking.
5. One effect of Billy's time travel is that he seems to be experiencing the war at the same time he is experiencing other events in his life. Give an example from either Chapter 2 or 3 of how Billy is simultaneously experiencing the war and other events in his life.

Chapter 5

1. Reread the description of the Tralfamadorian book.
 - A. Explain how Vonnegut is writing a book in this style
 - B. Literature is considered a reflection of life. How is this novel, written in “Tralfamadorian” style, a reflection of Vonnegut’s view of life?

2. Describe three images that have an impression on you. Why did these images catch your attention?

3. What irony do you see in the situation with the POW Englishmen?

4. How is Billy in reality one of the giraffes of his dream while he is in “morphine paradise”?

5. How are Eliot Rosewater and Billy similar? What does Eliot offer Billy that is “a big help”?

6. Find a quote that describes the conversation between Billy’s mother and Eliot. Explain it.

7. Vonnegut has Edgar Derby reinforce his two main points about war. What are they? What metaphor for war is used?

8. How do you feel about Edgar Derby? Why?

Chapter 7

1. Pg. 155 Vonnegut's subject is racism against Polish people. Explain the two ways Vonnegut shows this racism.
2. What is Billy expecting to happen? Why doesn't he tell anyone what he expects? What association is he making with this and the war? Why?
3. Explain the statement "Everything was pretty much all right with Billy." Pg. 157.
4. What do you find humorous in this chapter?
5. Vonnegut contrasts racism and humanitarianism in this chapter. Explain. What do you think Vonnegut is saying about human nature?

Chapter 9

1. Why does Valencia die?
2. In your opinion, why does Vonnegut include Rumfoord in the story?
3. Reread the quotes that explain the bombings on Pg. 185 - 188 What is the point of each quote? What is your opinion of the bombings and massacre during war?
4. Describe Billy's condition after the airplane crash, considering the following: "Actually, Billy's outward listlessness was a screen. The listlessness concealed a mind which was fizzing and flashing thrillingly."
5. What is Rumfoord's opinion of Billy? What is your opinion of Rumfoord and his opinions? Explain what is meant by "Rumfoord was thinking in a military manner."
6. When Rumfoord finally takes an interest in Billy and credits Billy for having been in Dresden, what opinion of the Dresden bombing does Billy express? Do you agree with Billy? Do you think this is Vonnegut's opinion of the Dresden bombing? Explain.
7. In your opinion, what is the significance of Billy's "sun-drenched snooze in the back of the wagon," followed by Billy bursting into tears over the horses. Do you think Billy can concentrate on this moment of his life as the Tralfamadorians advise him?