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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Slaughterhouse-Five

by Kurt Vonnegut

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Slaughterhouse–Five

Note to the Teacher

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 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, Billy 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 Billy’s life. This is helpful to the reader because the narrator, for the most part, follows Billy’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 Billy’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.

As a result, the style of the novel is considered unconventional. It is termed an anecdotal style, which means it is a collection of brief descriptions of situations or scenes. Vonnegut describes his style himself in Chapter 5 by saying, “There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effect. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.”

Science fiction typically uses a future or alien world to comment on our present world. Vonnegut’s alien creatures, the Tralfamadorians, offer Billy Pilgrim and the reader a different perspective on life; they help Billy come to terms with his war experiences and the emptiness of his life. Vonnegut is offering the reader these same solutions.

Introductory Activity

Imagine a large wall of TV sets. All of the screens have the same movie playing, except on each TV the movie is at a different point in the story. On one TV the movie is just starting, the next is at the last scene, another is on the fourth scene, the one under it is about two-thirds finished, and still another is finishing and beginning again. Also imagine that there is no particular order to the TV sets. This novel is like that wall of TV's all playing the same movie, only at a different point in the story. The narrator is looking from one TV to another and telling you what he sees. What do you imagine reading this novel will be like?

Writing Assignment

Directions: Write a reaction paper, a five-paragraph essay.

Your **introduction** should identify the novel, one of Vonnegut's ideas in the novel, and your general response to this idea.

Paragraph 2 should summarize Vonnegut's idea and how he brings it out in the novel.

Paragraph 3 should explain one reason you have for finding this idea meaningful or for disagreeing with Vonnegut. Be sure to use examples, incidents, and quotes from the novel to support your reaction.

Paragraph 4 should give a second reason for your response to the author's idea.

Your conclusion should be how this novel will affect you, your thinking, or your life in the future.

Suggested Responses:

Although student reactions to Vonnegut's ideas will vary, the following is a list of thematic ideas and the supporting detail which can be used.

1. Anti-War

Students can use any of the descriptions of the treatment of the POW's, images of death associated with war, and the pictures of Dresden before and after the bombing.

2. Emptiness of Modern Life

Students can mention Billy's silent tears, the need for fantasy, Vonnegut's gratitude for pleasant moments, and the several examples of irony.

3. Dehumanizing Effect of Technology

Students will probably mention the descriptions of Dresden after the bombing - the moonscape, etc.

4. Determinism

Support will mainly come from the Tralfamadorian ideas and from Billy as the passive "hero" who seems not to have or even try to have any control over the events of his life.

5. Death

Students will probably refer to either the Tralfamadorian ideas or to the war imagery.

Slaughterhouse–Five

Chapter I

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-warbooks, "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 6

1. What is your opinion of Lazzaro? Explain.

2. What promise does Lazzaro make to Billy? Considering Billy's description of the death, explain why think Lazzaro will or will not keep this promise.

3. Again, what is Vonnegut's attitude towards death which is expressed by Billy?

4. Vonnegut has made several direct criticisms of American life. What do you notice in this chapter about elections and speeches that can be an indirect mockery of the American system.

5. Who is the "leader" of the men? What do you think Vonnegut's point about leaders is with this description?
