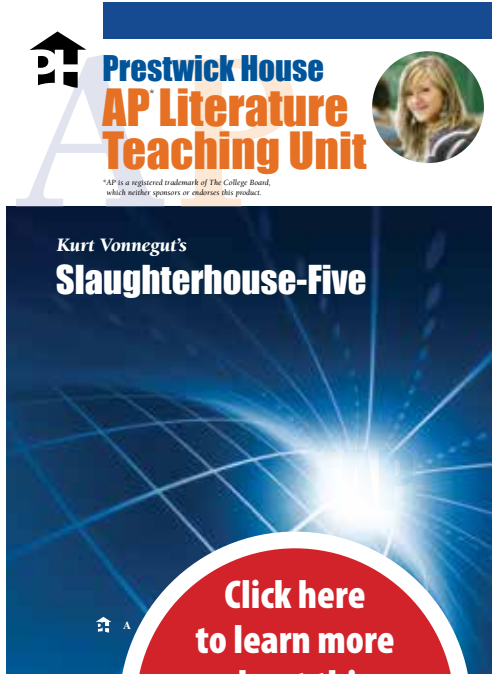




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Teaching Unit

Slaughterhouse-Five

by Kurt Vonnegut

written by Tom Zolpar



Prestwick House

Item No. 301916

Slaughterhouse-Five

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. Make connections between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the modernist and postmodernist movements, especially in terms of: character development, plot structure, tone, and style.
2. Make connections between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and important social, philosophic, and scientific issues in the 20th Century, especially: World War II and the Dresden bombing, the Vietnam Conflict, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, Einstein's theory of relativity, existentialism, postwar suburban living, Freud's theory of Eros and Thanatos, etc.
3. Identify and explain the use of black humor, satire, parody, dramatic irony, structural irony and verbal irony, anti-hero, ambiguity in theme, science fiction, episodic plot structure, flat, and static characterization.
4. Identify and explain Vonnegut's use of first-person and third-person points of view.
5. Identify and explain Vonnegut's use of simple, short sentences, and clipped dialogue.
6. Identify and explain the unconventional structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* derived from associations between episodes.
7. Identify and explain Vonnegut's approach to characterization in the novel.
8. Identify and explain Vonnegut's use of both "high" and "low" literature in the novel.
9. Discuss and explain key themes and motifs in the book, using material from the text as well as content from outside research.
10. Contrast characters in the book, using material in the text as support.
11. Identify examples of important symbols and metaphors in the book, and explain their function.
12. Develop an opinion of the literary merit of the book, using textual and outside material for support.
13. Respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
14. Respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.

Background Lecture

KURT VONNEGUT 1922 –

Born November 11 in Indianapolis, Indiana, an economically stable and socially conservative city in the Midwest.

His father was an architect. His mother was from a prominent family. The Vonnegut family itself had achieved considerable prosperity and stability over three generations. His brother, Bernard, would later become an eminent atmospheric physicist.

Vonnegut was seven in 1929 when the stock market crashed and the subsequent Great Depression devastated the Vonnegut family, Indianapolis, and the country. His family was forced to move from its mansion to a smaller home. His father, previously an arts lover, took a more practical turn, and his mother became despondent. Vonnegut was forced to attend public schools, unlike his older brother and sister, who had attended private schools. Vonnegut would later see his public school education as a positive experience.

1936 – 1940: Attended Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. Job prospects were scarce during the Depression so Vonnegut, following his family's wishes, opted for a practical career as a biochemist. He majored in chemistry and biology. He served as managing editor and columnist for the school newspaper, the *Cornell Sun*. He was hospitalized for pneumonia in his junior year. He enlisted in the U.S. Army after losing his deferred status.

1943: He studied mechanical engineering as part of his military training.

May 1944: His mother committed suicide on Mother's Day, overdosing on sleeping pills.

1944: He shipped out to England as part of the 106th Infantry Division. At this point in the war the Nazi, Japanese, and Italian war effort was in decline. Allied forces were bearing down on remaining Axis forces. Vonnegut's 2nd Battalion, 423rd Regiment, however, suffered nearly total destruction in the last major German offensive of the war—the Battle of the Bulge. Vonnegut, then 23 years old, wandered behind enemy lines. On Dec. 19, 1944, he was captured by the Germans and sent by rail car to Dresden, where he worked in a factory making vitamin-enriched malt syrup for pregnant women.

February 13 – 14, 1945: Dresden was bombed and destroyed by the U.S. Air Force and Royal Air Force. Vonnegut and his group of workers survived because they were housed underground in a massive former meat locker. They were forced to work as corpse miners following the bombing, digging dead bodies out of the rubble. By spring, Russian troops took the area, and Vonnegut was returned to American forces in May. He underwent rehabilitation in France and in the United States.

September 1945: Began graduate work in anthropology at University of Chicago after finishing rehabilitation and marrying his childhood sweetheart, Jane Cox.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In satire, the reader can't take characters and events at face value, but must reach his or her own conclusions about deeper meanings. Often, the writer intends the reader to judge harshly. The unusual wrinkle in this novel is that Vonnegut himself appears in the book and expresses a similar outlook to that of the characters. Should we take Vonnegut at face value? How should we judge, for instance, his "So it goes," indifference to death and war?
2. What is your judgment of Billy Pilgrim and what he represents? Does he deserve your sympathy? your blame?
3. What is Vonnegut's view of religion, science, government, industry and other modern institutions? What is the evidence for your view?
4. How does *Slaughterhouse-Five* represent a modern or postmodern work of art? What similarities and/or differences does it have with other works of art of the time period?
5. Imagery is perhaps Vonnegut's most powerful literary tool in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Explain the function of images in the book.
6. Compare and contrast images of paradise versus calamity in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and explain the use of such contrasting images.
7. Compare Tralfamadorians and the Nazis. How are they similar? Where in the novel does the author make such links? Does Billy—the Everyman—share any of the same characteristics as these two groups? What is Vonnegut suggesting with these comparisons?
8. To what degree is *Slaughterhouse-Five* an anti-war novel, a protest against the Vietnam Conflict, or World War II, etc.?
9. How could the Christian prediction, "The meek will inherit the earth" apply to this story?
10. One critic has said *Slaughterhouse-Five* represents a synthesis of Christian and Tralfamadorian values. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
11. Science fiction is a motif in the novel—Kilgore Trout's books, the world of Tralfamadore, etc. How does Vonnegut use science fiction as a metaphor for man's need to reinvent his world?
12. Framed on the wall in Billy's office is a copy of a prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference." Vonnegut goes on to write: "Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present, and the future." Montana Wildhack wears the same prayer around her neck on a locket. The locket also contains "a photograph of her alcoholic mother." Explain Vonnegut's meaning.

Chapter One

1. From what point of view is Chapter One told, and what effect does this literary technique have on the unfolding of the story?

2. In the first few pages of the book Vonnegut tells us off-handedly about a German cab driver's mother who "was incinerated in the Dresden firestorm. So it goes." Referring to the horrible firebombing a few paragraphs later, Vonnegut says he expected a book about his experiences "would be a masterpiece, or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big." And later a movie director jokes with Vonnegut that such an anti-war book would have as much appeal as an "anti-glacier" book. What is your reaction to these episodes strung together? What narrative tone is Vonnegut establishing?

3. What are Vonnegut's initial motivations in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* (as he informs us in this chapter) and what happens to change that motivation?

4. The author begins to clarify his own ideas by comparing and linking them to a rather strange assortment of high and low art: a ribald limerick, a nonsense song, the poetry of Roethke, the Bible, and social histories. Why?

Chapter Four

1. Where do we see people “spooning” in Chapters Three and Four? Why does Vonnegut create this association?

2. Name at least one other detail that connects the end of Chapter Three and the boxcar with Chapter Four and Ilium? What is the thematic purpose of this association?

3. What are some images of innocence, or Eden, featured in this chapter?

4. Billy, while “slightly unstuck in time,” watches a television movie about a World War II bombing raid, only he views the movie in reverse. Explain the meaning of this passage in the context of your developing understanding of the book.

5. How would you describe the morality of the Tralfadorians, as they are depicted in Chapter Four?

Chapter Eight

1. Explain the symbolism of the character Howard W. Campbell, Jr.

2. We have seen that periodically Vonnegut interjects himself into the narrative with commentary. One example is especially important. Explain.

3. Explain the character of Kilgore Trout in relation to the themes and other characters of the book.

4. Discuss the effect of the barbershop music on Billy in this chapter.

5. Throughout mythology and literature, caves and other underground vaults have often held the ambiguous symbolic significance of representing wombs and/or tombs. Discuss the underground slaughterhouse “meat locker” and the Americans’ survival of the bombing in light of this symbolism.

6. Discuss the scene at the inn, with the blind innkeeper and his wife, and the treatment of the Americans, in light of developing motifs and themes in the book.

Chapter Ten

1. From what you know about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, is Vonnegut accurate when he writes, "Charles Darwin, who taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements"?

2. How does the narrative point of view change in the last chapter? What is the effect of this literary strategy?

3. Why does Vonnegut consider his plane ride back from Dresden "one of the nicest [moments]" of his life? What is the author suggesting by underscoring this moment?

4. How does the information on population growth in O'Hare's pamphlet connect with the earlier mention of Charles Darwin and evolution?
