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Slaughterhouse-Five at a Glance

Slaughterhouse-Five
Kurt Vonnegut
Context

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born in Indianapolis in 1922, a descendant of prominent German-American families. His father was an architect and his mother was a noted beauty. Both spoke German fluently but declined to teach Kurt the language in light of widespread anti-German sentiment following World War I. Family money helped send Vonnegut's two siblings to private schools. The Great Depression hit hard in the 1930s, though, and the family placed Kurt in public school while it moved to more modest accommodations. While in high school, Vonnegut edited the school's daily newspaper. He attended college at Cornell for a little over two years, with instructions from his father and brother to study chemistry, a subject at which he did not excel. He also wrote for the Cornell Daily Sun. In 1943 he enlisted in the U.S. Army. In 1944 his mother committed suicide, and Vonnegut was taken prisoner following the Battle of the Bulge, in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium.

After the war, Vonnegut married and entered a master's degree program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He also worked as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. His master's thesis, titled Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales, was rejected. He departed for Schenectady, New York, to take a job in public relations at a General Electric research laboratory.

Vonnegut left GE in 1951 to devote himself full-time to writing. During the 1950s, Vonnegut published short stories in national magazines. Player Piano, his first novel, appeared in 1952. Sirens of Titan was published in 1959, followed by Mother Night (1962), Cat's Cradle (1963), God Bless You, Mr. Rose-water (1965), and his most highly praised work, - Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). Vonnegut continues to write prolifically.

Slaughterhouse-Five treats one of the most horrific massacres in European history—the World War II firebombing of Dresden, a city in eastern Germany, on February 13, 1945—with mock-serious humor and clear antiwar sentiment. More than 130,000 civilians died in Dresden, roughly the same number of deaths that resulted from the Allied bombing raids on Tokyo and from the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, both of which also occurred in 1945. Inhabitants of Dresden were incinerated or suffocated in a matter of hours as a firestorm sucked up and consumed available oxygen. The scene on the ground was one of unimaginable destruction.

The novel is based on Kurt Vonnegut's own experience in World War II. In the novel, a prisoner of war witnesses and survives the Allied forces' firebombing of Dresden. Vonnegut, like his pro-tagonist Billy Pilgrim, emerged from a meat locker beneath a slaughter-house into the moonscape of burned-out Dresden. His surviving captors put him to work finding, burying, and burning bodies. His task continued until the Russians came and the war ended. Vonnegut survived by chance, confined as a prisoner of war (POW) in a well-insulated meat locker, and so missed the cataclysmic moment of attack, emerging the day after into the charred ruins of a once-beautiful cityscape. Vonnegut has said that he always intended to write about the experience but found himself incapable of doing so for more than twenty years. Although he attempted to describe in simple terms what happened and to create a linear narrative, this strategy never worked for him. Billy Pilgrim's unhinged time—shifting, a mechanism for dealing with the unfathomable aggression and mass destruction he witnesses, is Vonnegut's solution to the problem of telling an untellable tale.

Vonnegut wrote Slaughterhouse-Five as a response to war. “It is so short and jumbled and jangled,” he explains in Chapter 1, “because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” The jumbled structure of the novel and the long delay between its conception and completion serve as testaments to a very personal struggle with heart-wrenching material. But the timing of the novel's publication also deserves notice: in 1969, the United States was in the midst of the dismal Vietnam War. Vonnegut was an outspoken pacifist and critic of the conflict. Slaughterhouse-Five revolves around the willful incineration of 100,000 civilians, in a city of extremely dubious military significance, during an arguably just war. Appearing when it did, then, Slaughterhouse-Five made a forceful statement about the campaign in Vietnam, a war in which incendiary technology was once more being employed against nonmilitary targets in the name of a dubious cause.

Slaughterhouse-Five
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Plot Overview

Note: Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, has become “unstuck in time.” He travels between periods of his life, unable to control which period he lands in. As a result, the narrative is not chronological or linear. Instead, it jumps back and forth in time and place. The novel is structured in small sections, each several paragraphs long, that describe various moments of his life.

Billy Pilgrim is born in 1922 and grows up in Ilium, New York. A funny-looking, weak youth, he does reasonably well in high school, enrolls in night classes at the Ilium School of Optometry, and is drafted into the army during World War II. He trains as a chaplain's assistant in South Carolina, where an umpire officiates during practice battles and announces who survives and who dies before they all sit down to lunch together. Billy's father dies in a hunting accident shortly before Billy ships overseas to join an infantry regiment in Luxembourg. Billy is thrown into the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium and is immediately taken prisoner behind German lines. Just before his capture, he experiences his first incident of time—shifting: he sees the entirety of his life, from beginning to end, in one sweep.

Billy is transported in a crowded railway boxcar to a POW camp in Germany. Upon his arrival, he and the other privates are treated to a feast by a group of fellow prisoners, who are English officers who were captured earlier in the war. Billy suffers a breakdown and gets a shot of morphine that sends him time-tripping again. Soon he and the other Americans travel onward to the beautiful city of Dresden, still relatively untouched by wartime privation. Here the prisoners must work for their keep at various labors, including the manufacture of a nutritional malt syrup. Their camp occupies a former slaughterhouse. One night, Allied forces carpet bomb the city, then drop incendiary bombs to create a firestorm that sucks most of the oxygen into the blaze, asphyxiating or incinerating roughly 130,000 people. Billy and his fellow POWs survive in an airtight meat locker. They emerge to find a moonscape of destruction, where they are forced to excavate corpses from the rubble. Several days later, Russian forces capture the city, and Billy's involvement in the war ends.

Billy returns to Ilium and finishes optometry school. He gets engaged to Valencia Merble, the obese daughter of the school's founder. After a nervous breakdown, Billy commits himself to a veterans' hospital and receives shock treatments. During his stay in the mental ward, a fellow patient introduces Billy to the science fiction novels of a writer named Kilgore Trout. After his recuperation, Billy gets married. His wealthy father-in-law sets him up in the optometry business, and Billy and Valencia raise two children and grow rich. Billy acquires the trappings of the suburban American dream: a Cadillac, a stately home with modern appliances, a bejeweled wife, and the presidency of the Lions Club. He is not aware of keeping any secrets from himself, but at his eighteenth wedding anniversary party the sight of a barbershop quartet makes him break down because, he realizes, it triggers a memory of Dresden.

The night after his daughter's wedding in 1967, as he later reveals on a radio talk show, Billy is kidnapped by two-foot-high aliens who resemble upside-down toilet plungers, who he says are called Tralfamadorians. They take him in their flying saucer to the planet Tralfamadore, where they mate him with a movie actress named Montana Wildhack. She, like Billy, has been brought from poop Earth poop to live under a transparent geodesic dome in a zoo where Tralfamadorians can observe extraterrestrial curiosities. The Tralfamadorians explain to Billy their perception of time, how its entire sweep exists for them simultaneously in the fourth dimension. When someone dies, that person is simply dead at a particular time. Somewhere else and at a different time he or she is alive and well. Tralfamadorians prefer to look at life's nicer moments.

When he returns to Earth, Billy initially says nothing of his experiences. In 1968, he gets on a chartered plane to go to an optometry conference in Montreal. The plane crashes into a mountain, and, among the optometrists, only Billy survives. A brain surgeon operates on him in a Vermont hospital. On her way to visit him there, Valencia dies of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning after crashing her car. Billy's daughter places him under the care of a nurse back home in Ilium. But he feels that the time is ripe to tell the world what he has learned. Billy has foreseen this moment while time-tripping, and he knows that his message will eventually be accepted. He sneaks off to New York City, where he goes on a radio talk show. Shortly thereafter, he writes a letter to the local paper. His daughter is at her wit's end and does not know what to do with him. Billy makes a tape recording of his account of his death, which he predicts will occur in 1976 after Chicago has been hydrogen-bombed by the Chinese. He knows exactly how it will happen: a vengeful man he knew in the war will hire someone to shoot him. Billy adds that he will experience the violet hum of death and then will skip back to some other point in his life. He has seen it all many times.

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Character List

Billy Pilgrim - A World War II veteran, POW survivor of the firebombing of Dresden, prospering optometrist, husband, and father. Billy Pilgrim is the protagonist of the novel who believes he has "come unstuck in time." He walks through a door at one moment in his life and suddenly finds himself in another time and place. His fragmented experience of time structures the novel as short episodic vignettes and shows how the difficulty of recounting traumatic experiences can require unusual literary techniques. Billy Pilgrim (In-Depth Analysis)

Kurt Vonnegut - The novel's author and a minor character. Vonnegut himself was a prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden, and he periodically inserts himself in the narrative, as when he becomes the incontinent soldier in the latrine in the German prison camp. This authorial presence reappears throughout the novel, particularly in the refrain "So it goes" that follows each mention of death. Vonnegut's commentary as a character and an author enables a more factual interpretation of a story that seems almost preternaturally fictional and adds support to the idea that such fantastical elements may be the reality of a traumatized mind.

Bernhard V. O'Hare - A wartime pal of Vonnegut. O'Hare appears when Vonnegut visits him and his wife in Pennsylvania while trying to do research and collect remembrances for his Dresden book. Like his wife, Mary, and Vonnegut himself, O'Hare, a nonfictional character, helps ground Slaughterhouse-Five in reality. Vonnegut actually has this other survivor of the firebombing contribute to the research and recollection process involved in creating the book, which allows us to take the novelistic details as fact and appreciate the thoughtful manner in which they are presented.

Mary O'Hare - Bernhard O'Hare's wife. Mary gets upset with Vonnegut because she believes that he will glorify war in his novel; Vonnegut, however, promises not to do so. Slaughterhouse-Five is a condemnation of war, and Vonnegut's decision to dedicate the novel in part to Mary suggests how deeply he agrees with her that the ugly truth about war must be told.

Gerhard Müller - The nonfictional taxi driver who takes Vonnegut and O'Hare back to their Dresden slaughterhouse. Müller later sends O'Hare a Christmas card bearing tidings of peace, and Vonnegut dedicates the novel in part to Müller—two simple gestures of sympathy that stand out amid the novel's pervasive cruelty and violence.

Roland Weary - A stupid, cruel soldier taken prisoner by the Germans along with Billy. Unlike Billy, who is totally out of place in the war, Weary is a deluded glory-seeker who fancies himself part of the Three Musketeers and saves Billy's life out of a desire to be heroic.

Wild Bob - An army colonel in the German rail yard who has lost his mind. Wild Bob asks if Billy belongs to his regiment when, in fact, all his men are dead. He invites everyone to visit him in Wyoming, but his arbitrary death shows how the war makes such gestures both poignant and pointless.

Paul Lazzaro - Another POW and the man responsible for Billy's death. Lazzaro, a revenge-loving ruffian with criminal tendencies, arranges for Billy's assassination to avenge Roland Weary's death. Lazzaro's determination to kill Billy does not create a conflict between the two characters, however; because Billy has accepted the Tralfamadorians' conception of nonlinear time, he is unconcerned by his death.

Edgar Derby - Another survivor of Dresden's incineration. Following the firebombing, Derby is sentenced to die by firing squad for plundering a teapot from the wreckage. His death is anticlimactic, since Billy does not view it with any sense of pathos, but rather as an inevitability.

Valencia Merble - Billy's pleasant, fat wife who loves him dearly. Valencia and Billy share a well-appointed home and have two children together, but Billy consistently distances himself from his family.

Tralfamadorians - Aliens shaped like toilet plungers, each with one hand containing an eye in its palm. The Tralfamadorians' philosophies of time and death influence the narrative style of the novel. They perceive time as an assemblage of moments existing simultaneously rather than as a linear progression, and the episodic nature of Slaughterhouse-Five reflects this notion of time. Their acceptance of death, which Billy embraces, leads the narrator to remark simply “So it goes” at each mention of death.

Eliot Rosewater - A war veteran who occupies the bed near Billy in the mental ward of a veterans' hospital. Like Billy, Rosewater is suffering from the aftereffects of war, and he finds escape—and helps Billy find escape—in the science-fiction novels of Kilgore Trout.

Kilgore Trout - A bitter, unappreciated author of several cleverly ironic science-fiction novels that have a great influence on Billy. Trout, who appears in many of Vonnegut's works, functions as Vonnegut's alter ego.

Howard W. Campbell, Jr. - An American who has become a Nazi. Campbell speaks to the prisoners in the slaughterhouse and tries to recruit them for "The Free American Corps," a German army unit that he is forming to fight the Russians. Campbell represents all that is wrong with war; he desires to use people for perverse ideological ends.

Werner Gluck - A young German guard at the slaughterhouse. Gluck gets his first glimpse of a naked woman along with Billy. Their shared intrigue and interest in the naked female body unites these two men from different sides, reflecting how fundamentally human feelings—such as lust—can trump differences of political ideology.

Montana Wildhack - A nubile young actress who is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians to be Billy's mate inside the zoo. Billy wins Montana's trust and love, and fathers a child by her in Tralfamadore. But Billy likely is delusional about his experiences with Montana, whose presence may have been imaginatively triggered by a visit to an adult bookstore in Times Square, where he sees her videos and a headline claiming to reveal her fate.

Barbara Pilgrim - Billy's daughter, newly married at the age of twenty-one, who is faced with the sudden death of her mother and the apparent mental breakdown of her father. Barbara represents the follow-up generation to the one ravaged by World War II. While Billy's ability to function in life and be successful in a career paves the way for Barbara's development, his war trauma and delusions constantly frustrate her.

Bertram Copeland Rumfoord - A Harvard history professor and the official U.S. Air Force historian who is laid up by a skiing accident in the same Vermont hospital as Billy after his plane crash. Rumfoord's reluctance to believe that Billy was present during the Dresden raid embodies the bureaucratic attitude that seeks to glorify the war and its heroes instead of realistically portraying war's destructiveness and its haphazard selection of survivors.

Lily Rumfoord - Rumfoord's young trophy wife and research assistant. Lily Rumfoord is frightened of Billy, but she lies silent in the next bed as a symbol of the scope of powerlessness and lack of free will.

Robert Pilgrim - Billy's son, who is a failure and a delinquent at school, though he cleans up his life enough to become a Green Beret in the Vietnam War. Robert's presence in the story during Billy's later life helps illustrate the pervasiveness of Billy's war trauma, especially his inability to communicate and relate to his own son. Robert's successful self-reformation from delinquency to discipline (in Vietnam) seems to indicate Vonnegut's acceptance of the inevitability of war.

Billy's mother - Billy's mother is described as a woman "trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (she once hung a grisly crucifix in Billy's room but never joined a church because she couldn't settle on a denomination). She visits Billy in the mental hospital, and her presence embarrasses him because he feels like an ungrateful son for being indifferent to life.

Billy's father - Billy's father throws young Billy into the YMCA pool to teach him how to swim. Billy prefers the bottom of the pool, but he is rescued unwillingly from drowning after he loses consciousness. This incident initiates the novel's theme of the illusory nature of free will.

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Character Analysis

Billy Pilgrim

Billy Pilgrim is the unlikeliest of antiwar heroes. An unpopular and complacent weakling even before the war (he prefers sinking to swimming), he becomes a joke as a soldier. He trains as a chaplain's assistant, a duty that earns him disgust from his peers. With scant preparation for armed conflict, no weapons, and even an improper uniform, he is thrust abruptly into duty at the Battle of the Bulge. The farcical spectacle created by Billy's inappropriate clothing accentuates the absurdity of such a scrawny, mild-mannered soldier. His azure toga, a leftover scrap of stage curtain, and his fur-lined overcoat, several sizes too small, throw his incongruity into relief. They underscore a central irony: such a creature could walk through war, oblivious yet unscathed, while so many others with more appropriate attire and provisions perish. It is in this shocked and physically exhausted state that Billy first comes “unstuck in time” and begins swinging to and fro through the events of his life, past and future.

Billy lives a life full of indignity and so, perhaps, has no great fear of death. He is oddly suited, therefore, to the Tralfamadorian philosophy of accepting death. This fact may point to an interpretation of the Tralfamadorians as a figment of Billy's disturbed mind, an elaborate coping mechanism to explain the meaningless slaughter Billy has witnessed. By uttering “So it goes” after each death, the narrator, like Billy, does not diminish the gravity of death but rather lends an equalizing dignity to all death, no matter how random or ironic, how immediate or removed. Billy's father dies in a hunting accident just as Billy is about to go off to war. So it goes. A former hobo dies in Billy's railway car while declaring the conditions not bad at all. So it goes. One hundred thirty thousand innocent people die in Dresden. So it goes. Valencia Pilgrim accidentally kills herself with carbon monoxide after turning bright blue. So it goes. Billy Pilgrim is killed by an assassin's bullet at exactly the time he has predicted, in the realization of a thirty-some-year-old death threat. So it goes. Billy awaits death calmly, without fear, knowing the exact hour at which it will come. In so doing, he gains a degree of control over his own dignity that he has lacked throughout most of his life.

The novel centers on Billy Pilgrim to a degree that excludes the development of the supporting characters, who exist in the text only as they relate to Billy's experience of events.

Slaughterhouse-Five
Kurt Vonnegut
Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Destructiveness of War

Whether we read Slaughterhouse-Five as a science-fiction novel or a quasi-autobiographical moral statement, we cannot ignore the destructive properties of war, since the catastrophic firebombing of the German town of Dresden during World War II situates all of the other seemingly random events. From his swimming lessons at the YMCA to his speeches at the Lions Club to his captivity in Tralfamadore, Billy Pilgrim shifts in and out of the meat locker in Dresden, where he very narrowly survives asphyxiation and incineration in a city where fire is raining from the sky.

However, the not-so-subtle destructiveness of the war is evoked in subtle ways. For instance, Billy is quite successful in his postwar exploits from a materialistic point of view: he is president of the Lions Club, works as a prosperous optometrist, lives in a thoroughly comfortable modern home, and has fathered two children. While Billy seems to have led a productive postwar life, these seeming markers of success speak only to its surface. He gets his job not because of any particular prowess but as a result of his father-in-law's efforts. More important, at one point in the novel, Billy walks in on his son and realizes that they are unfamiliar with each other. Beneath the splendor of his success lies a man too war-torn to understand it. In fact, Billy's name, a diminutive form of William, indicates that he is more an immature boy than a man.

Vonnegut, then, injects the science-fiction thread, including the Tralfamadorians, to indicate how greatly the war has disrupted Billy's existence. It seems that Billy may be hallucinating about his experiences with the Tralfamadorians as a way to escape a world destroyed by war—a world that he cannot understand. Furthermore, the Tralfamadorian theory of the fourth dimension seems too convenient a device to be more than just a way for Billy to rationalize all the death with he has seen face-to-face. Billy, then, is a traumatized man who cannot come to terms with the destructiveness of war without invoking a far-fetched and impossible theory to which he can shape the world.

The Illusion of Free Will

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut utilizes the Tralfamadorians, with their absurdly humorous toilet-plunger shape, to discuss the philosophical question of whether free will exists. These aliens live with the knowledge of the fourth dimension, which, they say, contains all moments of time occurring and reoccurring endlessly and simultaneously. Because they believe that all moments of time have already happened (since all moments repeat themselves endlessly), they possess an attitude of acceptance about their fates, figuring that they are powerless to change them. Only on Earth, according to the Tralfamadorians, is there talk of free will, since humans, they claim, mistakenly think of time as a linear progression.

Throughout his life, Billy runs up against forces that counter his free will. When Billy is a child, his father lets him sink into the deep end of a pool in order to teach him how to swim. Much to his father's dismay, however, Billy prefers the bottom of the pool, but, against his free will to stay there, he is rescued. Later, Billy is drafted into the war against his will. Even as a soldier, Billy is a joke, lacking training, supplies, and proper clothing. He bobs along like a puppet in Luxembourg, his civilian shoes flapping on his feet, and marches through the streets of Dresden draped in the remains of the scenery from a production of Cinderella.

Even while Vonnegut admits the inevitability of death, with or without war, he also tells us that he has instructed his sons not to participate in massacres or in the manufacture of machinery used to carry them out. But acting as if free will exists does not mean that it actually does. As Billy learns to accept the Tralfamadorian teachings, we see how his actions indicate the futility of free will. Even if Billy were to train hard, wear the proper uniform, and be a good soldier, he might still die like the others in Dresden who are much better soldiers than he. That he survives the incident as an improperly trained joke of a soldier is a testament to the deterministic forces that render free will and human effort an illusion.

The Importance of Sight

True sight is an important concept that is difficult to define for Slaughterhouse-Five. As an optometrist in Ilium, Billy has the professional duty of correcting the vision of his patients. If we extend the idea of seeing beyond the literal scope of Billy's profession, we can see that Vonnegut sets Billy up with several different lenses with which to correct the world's nearsightedness. One of the ways Billy can contribute to this true sight is through his knowledge of the fourth dimension, which he gains from the aliens at Tralfamadore. He believes in the Tralfamadorians' view of time—that all moments of time exist simultaneously and repeat themselves endlessly. He thus believes that he knows what will happen in the future (because everything has already happened and will continue to happen in the same way).

One can also argue, however, that Billy lacks sight completely. He goes to war, witnesses horrific events, and becomes mentally unstable as a result. He has a shaky grip on reality and at random moments experiences overpowering flashbacks to other parts of his life. His sense that aliens have captured him and kept him in a zoo before sending him back to Earth may be the product of an overactive imagination. Given all that Billy has been through, it is logical to believe that he has gone insane, and it makes sense to interpret these bizarre alien encounters as hallucinatory incidents triggered by mundane events that somehow create an association with past traumas. Looking at Billy this way, we can see him as someone who has lost true sight and lives in a cloud of hallucinations and self-doubt. Such a view creates the irony that one employed to correct the myopic view of others is actually himself quite blind.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.
“So It Goes”

The phrase “So it goes” follows every mention of death in the novel, equalizing all of them, whether they are natural, accidental, or intentional, and whether they occur on a massive scale or on a very personal one. The phrase reflects a kind of comfort in the Tralfamadorian idea that although a person may be dead in a particular moment, he or she is alive in all the other moments of his or her life, which coexist and can be visited over and over through time travel. At the same time, though, the repetition of the phrase keeps a tally of the cumulative force of death throughout the novel, thus pointing out the tragic inevitability of death.

The Presence of the Narrator as a Character