

## GENERAL INFORMATION ON *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*

### Subtitle:

*The Children's Crusade*, added to that, "A Duty-Dance with Death."

Further identified as a work by a World War II POW who witnessed the firebombing of Dresden, "The Florence of the Elbe," and as written "Somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from."

### Setting:

Germany, Luxembourg, the USA, and a zoo on Tralfamadore

### Time:

1922- 13 Feb. 1976, primarily (the birth and death of Billy Pilgrim), with allusions to various events from shortly after the beginning of the universe (Adam and Eve) to the destruction of the universe.

### Tense:

Usually past tense, but with occasional present.

### Point of View:

In the "frame" in the first and beginning of the last chapters, first-person-protagonist narration; in the story of Billy Pilgrim, mostly third-person, omniscient narration, "over the shoulder" of Billy--but with occasional references to "KV" (Vonnegut as character), when he was there, near Billy but never meeting Billy.

### Major Characters

1. **"KV"**: Vonnegut as narrator and character
2. **Bernard V. O'Hare**: World War II (WWII) buddy to Vonnegut and "KV"
3. **Mary O'Hare**: Wife to B.V.O. and enemy of the glorification of war
4. **Billy Pilgrim (usually "Billy")**: a man who became unstuck in time--or who simply became "unstuck"--in 1944, the antiheroic protagonist
5. **Valencia Merble**: rich, fat, unattractive woman Billy Pilgrim marries
6. **Barbara and Robert Pilgrim**: daughter and son to Billy Pilgrim and Valencia
7. **Montana Wildhack**: beautiful actress of Billy Pilgrim's (erotic) dreams, with whom Billy Pilgrim is mated on Tralfamadore
8. **Paul Lazzaro**: POW with Billy Pilgrim and murderer of Billy Pilgrim
9. **Roland Weary**: American weirdo who is captured with Billy Pilgrim
10. **Edgar Derby**: decent American high school teacher who is executed for looting at Dresden
11. **Eliot Rosewater**: SF fan in bed next to Billy Pilgrim's in mental ward of veterans' hospital
12. **Kilgore Trout**: prolific and utterly unsuccessful writer of SF stories, who has good ideas--but who may give Billy Pilgrim a terrible idea
13. **Bertram Copeland Rumfoord**: Official Historian of U.S. Air Force
14. **Tralfamadoreans**: Intelligent creatures from the planet Tralfamadore, who capture Billy Pilgrim and display him and M. Wildhack in their zoo--"really" or only in Billy Pilgrim's mind.

### Plot:

Mostly the life story of Billy Pilgrim, framed with "KV's" story.

### Theme:

- War is hell.
- Human responsibility.
- Even if we are machines, we can struggle to be human machines, looking back on the past and striving to at least do less harm in the present and future.

## **Theological Points:**

Vonnegut is not a Christian or even a theist; he may use traditional religious images (etc.) in untraditional ways.

The Tralfamadorian view of time is Godlike; traditional theology holds that God's foreknowing what we (will) do does not determine what we (will) do.

## **Study Guide Questions for *Slaughterhouse Five***

### **General Questions (to be completed during and/or after reading)**

1. To what extent is Billy Pilgrim a Christ figure?
2. What is the significance of the Tralfamadore narrative?
3. What role does Kilgore Trout play? Other secondary characters?
4. In what ways is this novel an anti-war narrative? Is it also anti-American in certain ways?  
How does the novel compare with other war narratives?
5. How is warfare presented in the novel? How, in particular, is the bombing of Dresden presented?
6. Where and why does "KV" insert himself into the text?  
Are we supposed to view this presence as the "real" Kurt Vonnegut?  
Does "KV" appear to sympathize with particular views and characters?
7. How does Vonnegut handle traditional narrative elements, such as time, plot, point of view, and characterization?

## **Chapter One**

1. What does Vonnegut use as the epigraph to his novel?
2. Who is the "I" of the first chapter? Is this Kurt Vonnegut? A fictional creation ("KV") modeled on Vonnegut? Why does Vonnegut include this section as Chapter One of his novel?
3. What "persona" does "KV" construct for himself in this chapter? Why does he include the anecdotes that he does?
4. What does "KV" say about the construction of his narrative on pages 6-7?
5. What was "KV" taught in the Anthropology Department?
6. What is Mary O'Hare's view of war? Do you agree with her that wars are encouraged by books and movies?
7. What is the Children's Crusade?
8. What does "KV" inform us about Dresden's history?
9. What does he tell us about his trip back to Dresden? Which books does he take on the plane?
10. What does "KV" conclude about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah? Is this meant to be ironic?
11. Why does he call his war book a failure?

## **Chapter Two**

1. How is Billy's life presented in the beginning of Chapter Two?
2. Early on, what appears to be "KV"'s attitude toward Billy (tone, point of view, etc.)?
3. What has Billy learned from the Tralfamadorians (see pages 33-4)?
4. When did Billy first become "unstuck" in time?
5. What was his position in the Army? How is Billy described as a soldier?
6. Describe Roland Weary. What was his father's hobby?
7. Why does "KV" include the anecdote about Weary's photograph?
8. From the forest in Europe, where does Billy "jump" in time? How does "KV" present these "travels"?
9. What happens to Billy and Weary, and how does Weary react?

### Chapter Three

1. How are the German soldiers described at the beginning of the chapter?
2. Billy flashes back and forth between 1944 and 1967.  
What scenes from 1967 are described and how do they relate to his experience in Luxembourg?
3. "KV" tells the reader on page 86, "I was there" (referring to the colonel's home of Cody, Wyoming).  
Why?
4. How are the conditions inside the boxcar described?

### Chapter Four

1. What echoes from earlier scenes can you find in the beginning of Chapter Four?
2. How does Billy "kill time" before the arrival of the Tralfamadorians?
3. How is their arrival described? Why do you think Vonnegut has situated it at this point in the novel?
4. How are the conditions at the POW camp described?
5. How are Derby and Lazzaro presented?
6. What do the Tralfamadorians note about Earthlings at the end of Chapter Four?  
What are we Earthlings to make of this philosophy?

### Chapter Five

1. What are Tralfamadorian books like? How does this relate to Billy's flashback to the Grand Canyon and Carlsbad Caverns?
2. How are the English POWs described? Are we supposed to be sympathetic toward them?
3. Of what does Vonnegut remind us on page 122?
4. What do Eliot Rosewater and Billy have in common?
5. If Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* has everything there is to know about life, according to Rosewater, why is that not enough any more? What role might science fiction play?
6. Why do the psychiatrists need to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies?
7. What is the premise of Trout's *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*?
8. How does Billy view his relationship with Valencia?
9. What revision to the Bible does *The Gospel from Outer Space* make?
10. What is Rosewater's view of Trout?
11. Describe the conditions in the Tralfamadorian zoo.
12. What is the Tralfamadorian attitude toward Earth and its wars? To the end of universe?  
Do you think Vonnegut means us to take this seriously?
13. How does Billy respond to his wife's questions about the war?  
What would make a good epitaph for him, and for "KV"?
14. What scenes are juxtaposed following the epitaph page?  
Why does "KV" choose to insert himself as author in one of these scenes (page 160)?
15. Summarize the main ideas from Campbell's monograph.
16. Of what does Montana Wildhack's body remind Billy?

### Chapter Six

1. Why does Vonnegut open Chapter Six (as with Chapter Two) with the words, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim ..."?
2. What did Lazzaro do to a dog one time? What, for him, is the sweetest thing in life?
3. How and when does Billy Pilgrim die? What is the significance of this date?
4. How is the arrival in Dresden described? What metaphor is used to describe the situation?
5. Why do you think Vonnegut takes almost 200 pages before we arrive at Slaughterhouse-Five?

### Chapter Seven

1. Why does Vonnegut include the anecdote about the barbershop quartet on the plane?
2. How are 1945 and 1968 interwoven in this chapter?

3. What are some of the "true" things Billy sees in Dresden while unconscious in Vermont?  
Why does Vonnegut include these details?

### **Chapter Eight**

1. How does Vonnegut preface Derby's response to Campbell's attempted recruitment of the Americans?
2. How does Billy meet and befriend Kilgore Trout?
3. Why do you think Vonnegut includes the scene with Trout and Maggie White?
4. Why does Billy become upset by the barbershop quartet's song?
5. Why does Billy not travel in time back to the Dresden firebombing, but remembers "normally"?
6. What "story" does Billy tell to Montana? Why do you think that Vonnegut uses this method?

### **Chapter Nine**

1. How does Billy's wife, Valencia, die? What does this add to the text?
2. To what end does Vonnegut include the character of Bertram Copeland Rumfoord?
3. What is the significance of the wagon scene in Dresden?
4. How does Billy respond to Rumfoord's view that the bombing of Dresden had to be done?
5. What are some of the books Billy comes across on his trip to New York City?

### **Chapter Ten**

1. Why does "KV" reintroduce himself into the narrative at the beginning of Chapter Ten?
2. How does "KV" appear to feel about Tralfamadorian philosophy?
3. What happens to Billy's and "KV"'s stories on page 271?
4. How is the supposed climax of the novel, Derby's execution, presented?
5. Describe the ending of the novel.