

Slaughterhouse-Five Study Questions

Chapter 1

1. What do we learn in the early part of the novel about the events at Dresden? Why is the narrator so driven to write about Dresden? How does the narrator feel about the significance of the novel?
2. What is the significance of the narrator's repeated comment "So it goes," and what attitude do you think it is meant to express?
3. What does the narrator seem to think of "tough" people like his boss in Alplaus, who was a "lieutenant colonel in public relations in Baltimore"? Who are they contrasted with?
4. Why do you think information about the bombing of Dresden was still top secret at the time Vonnegut was working on the novel, years after the war had ended?
5. Why is Mary O'Hare angry with the narrator, and how does he respond to her anger? Consider the poem by Wilfred Owen in this handout. Why is "The Children's Crusade" an appropriate title for any work about war?
6. What characteristics of the city itself make the firebombing of Dresden especially savage, tragic, and ironic?
7. What is Vonnegut's attitude toward massacres like the firebombing of Dresden—what lessons does he try to convey to his sons? How does he seem to feel about the Biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Chapter 2

1. What is the most fundamental difference between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2?
2. What unique phenomenon happens to Billy Pilgrim? Describe the effect it has on him. (Consider, for example, his experience giving a speech to the Lions Club after being elected president.) Based on the information in this chapter, what do you think is the source or nature of this phenomenon?
3. Describe the Tralfamadorians as depicted by Billy. What characteristic philosophical beliefs and attitudes do they have? How is "so it goes" a reflection of their philosophy? Why does Billy feel compelled to tell people about them?
4. Based on the descriptions of him and the actions he takes (or doesn't take) in this chapter, describe Billy Pilgrim as he is during the war. What is the tone of the narration in depicting him?
5. Describe Roland Weary. What insights into his character does the chapter provide?
6. In the context of an anti-war novel, what do Billy and Roland represent—what are they examples of? Consider the important characteristic they have in common despite all their differences.
7. Find examples of irony in this chapter.

Chapters 3 & 4

1. Describe the experiences of the prisoners during and after their capture. What is the overall effect of the narrator's presentation of these events? What themes are suggested by the narrator's descriptions of the photographer and the men with the "motion-picture camera"?
2. Why do you think Billy experiences the war movie backwards—what is the significance of this way of perceiving it? What significance do you think the references to Adam and Eve in these chapters (Billy's seeing a vision of them in the German officer's boots and thinking of them while watching the war movie) have?

3. Describe Billy's life as a middle-aged man after the war. In his leaps into his future life, what trends and themes do we see? Is there any foreshadowing of these trends during the war?
4. What theme that permeates the novel is suggested by these details from these chapters?
 - "Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do."
 - "Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present, and the future."
 - "Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*."
 - "If I hadn't spent so much time studying Earthlings, I wouldn't have any idea what was meant by 'free will.'"

Chapters 5 & 6

1. What examples of the unique Tralfamadorian perception of the universe are presented at the beginning of Chapter 5? Discuss them. Explain why Tralfamadorian novels are so different from Earth novels. How does this information relate to the structure *Slaughterhouse-Five*—does it have any implications for how the novel should be read?

2. Describe the English officers that Billy and the Americans are left with.

They were adored by the Germans, who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun.

In what ways is their situation absurd? How do they deal with their situation? (What qualities do they show that might be seen as characteristically English?) How do they react to the Americans, and why? Do you think their judgments of the Americans are fair? Why or why not?

3. Interpret Billy's dream about being a giraffe. Why does he commit himself to a mental hospital? (Consider his belief that his decision to marry Valencia is "one of the symptoms of his disease.") Is there any connection between the dream and his decision to have himself committed?
4. Why do Billy and Eliot Rosewater enjoy reading science fiction? Why do you think people in the modern world need "a lot of wonderful *new* lies" and that the wisdom in *The Brothers Karamazov* "isn't *enough* anymore"? How might the Tralfamadorians' philosophy of life provide an answer to the problem of how to go on living in the modern world? (Consider, for example, the lesson for Earthlings passed on to Billy while he is in the Tralfamadorian zoo and Billy's attitude toward his own death.)
5. What flaw does the author Kilgore Trout see in the teachings of the New Testament?
6. What do you think is the meaning of the epitaph on the drawing of the gravestone ("Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt")?
7. How are Americans perceived by Germans (through the propaganda written by Howard W. Campbell)? Is there any truth to his descriptions of Americans and American culture?
8. What do you think is the significance of the brief appearances of the narrator (presumably Vonnegut himself) in these chapters (as an American soldier overheard by Billy)?
9. What transformation do we see in Billy in the scene in which he is assassinated (also hinted at in earlier flash-forward scenes of his later life)? How would you explain this change in him?
10. How is Dresden described in Chapter 6, and what is the significance of this description?

Chapters 7 & 8

1. In describing the significance and unusualness of Edgar Derby's speech denouncing Howard Campbell, the narrator says, "One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters." What do you think he means?
2. Based on the narrator's description of its plot, what seems to be the main idea expressed by Kilgore Trout's novel *The Gutless Wonder*?
3. Why does Billy have such a strong reaction to the Febs ("four ordinary men, cow-eyed and mindless and anguished as they went from sweetness to sourness to sweetness again") when they sing at his anniversary party? What is the "great big secret somewhere inside" Billy that he had not suspected he had? How is Kilgore Trout's comment that he looked "as though [he] all of a sudden realized [he was] standing on thin air" an appropriate description?
4. What ironies are there in the survival of the American prisoners through the destruction of Dresden?
5. Why do you think the Slaughterhouse-Five guards look like a barbershop quartet? What is the tone of this way of describing them?
6. Describe the scenes the narrator witnesses after the firebombing of Dresden. What do the Allies intend to accomplish by destroying the city? After the narrator's description of the devastation and of the attempts by American pilots to kill the few survivors, he succinctly comments, "The idea was to hasten the end of the war." Discuss your understanding of the intended tone and effect of this sentence.
7. Why do you think the one hundred American prisoners don't try to escape from the four guards after the destruction of Dresden?
8. Describe the reaction of the family that owns the inn to the firebombing of Dresden. Discuss the tone and significance of the chapter-ending words spoken by the owner: "Good night, Americans. Sleep well."

Chapters 9 & 10

1. What is the significance of Valencia's death (in terms of them, plot, etc.)? What is ironic about the transformation in Robert Pilgrim's character after he joins the Green Berets?
2. Discuss the significance of the narrator's presentation of the character of Professor Rumfoord. Describe Billy's attitude toward the bombing of Dresden as revealed in his conversation with Rumfoord. How would you interpret Vonnegut's presentation of the quotations from the foreword to *The Destruction of Dresden*?
3. Why doesn't Billy cry much during the war, and why do you think he does cry about the horses pulling the wagon in Dresden? (Think about the epigraph of the novel: "But the little Lord Jesus/No crying he makes.") What is the significance of the fact that the German doctors notice the horses' condition, but "the Americans had treated their form of transportation as though it were no more sensitive than a six-cylinder Chevrolet"?
4. Jesus is mentioned several other times in these chapters. What do you think is the significance of these details?
 - He and his father are happy to build a cross for Roman soldiers to use in an execution.
 - The protagonist of Kilgore Trout's novel sees him "dead as a doornail."
 - The Tralfamadorians find Darwin much more interesting than Jesus.

5. Discuss the significance of Billy's coming across the Kilgore Trout novels and the magazine about Montana Wildhack's disappearance in the bookstore.
6. Why are Billy and Montana Wildhack so casual about the potentially upsetting things they say about each other (e.g. that he saw part of a "blue movie" she made and that he was a "clown" in the war)? Discuss the significance of the quote on Montana's locket: "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."
7. What do you think is the purpose of the first section of Chapter 10? What is the meaning of the narrator's later comment regarding the Earth's future population of 7 billion that "they will all want dignity"?
8. The plot of the novel seems to lack a conventional climax and resolution. Evaluate the last two chapters as an ending to the story. Why do you think Vonnegut chose to end the story the way he did? Discuss the significance of the last line of the novel.

Summary and Review Questions

1. What attitudes does Vonnegut (as the narrator) seem to have toward the questions of human existence, human nature, and human society? Consider some of the following details from the text:
 - “Like so many Americans, [Billy’s mother] was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops.”
 - What do you think the narrator means when he says he learned that “nobody [is] ridiculous or bad or disgusting” (Chapter 1), and how does that idea apply to this story?
 - How would you interpret the symbolic and thematic significance of the birds whistling “Poo-tee-weet?” (This idea is mentioned near the end of Chapter 1 and then again at the end of the novel.)
2. Why do you think Vonnegut chose to incorporate science fiction elements into what is largely a true account of a historical event?
3. Why do you think Vonnegut chose to structure the story in such an unconventional way rather than in a chronological way or through a more traditional flashback structure?
4. What logical paradoxes does being “unstuck in time” present?
5. Find and discuss three instances of irony in the novel. What thematic significance do they have?
6. Find three examples of absurdity in the novel and discuss their significance.

Writing Prompts

1. Discuss the various ways Vonnegut develops the anti-war message in the novel. Do you think this message is expressed effectively? Explain why or why not.
2. Do you think Billy’s Tralfamadorian perspective on time and his experiences with time travel are real or delusions? Consider the evidence in the text, including these words about the French soldier/doctor/writer Celine in Chapter 1:

Time obsessed him. Miss Ostrovsky reminded me of the amazing scene in *Death on the Installment Plan* where Celine wants to stop the bustling of a street crowd. He screams on paper, *Make them stop...don't let them move anymore at all...There, make them freeze...once and for all! ...So that they won't disappear anymore!*

Dulce et Decorum est*
Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling
10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. —
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

15 In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
20 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
25 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

* “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” is a line from the Roman lyrical poet Horace’s Odes (iii 2.13). The line can be rendered in English as “It is sweet and appropriate to die for one’s country,” or “It is sweet and fitting to die for the fatherland.” [from *Wikipedia*]