Slaughterhouse-Five

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born in Indianapolis, studied chemistry and engineering at Cornell and other universities, and entered the Second World War as a private in the US Army. In the Battle of the Bulge he was taken prisoner by the Germans, and his experiences in Dresden during and after the firebombing of that city form some of the factual basis for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After the war he studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, worked as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau, and later moved to New York State to write for General Electric as a public relations man. (These facts are also included in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.) Vonnegut had seven children (three biological, four adopted) and was married several times. He taught at various institutions, including the Iowa Writers' Workshop. *Cat's Cradle*, an earlier novel, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* brought Vonnegut national recognition and a wide readership, which continue up to and after his death in 2007.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vonnegut was writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* during the escalation of the American war in Vietnam, a war that was never declared by Congress and was viewed by many Americans as a complicated, unjust, and unnecessary use of US power. As in World War II, the Vietnam War prompted Congress to call a draft, although the divide in public opinion meant that soldiers themselves were caught in a complex political struggle, and after years of battle were made to return to a country that did no always congratulate them for their service. This, and the larger Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two emergent powers after World War II, form the political backdrop to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Reports of men killed in Vietnam ran on the nightly news for much of the late '60s and early '70s, and the stockpiling of nuclear arms in the US and the USSR continued until the collapse of the latter in the late 1980s. Thus Vonnegut's World War II novel, describing the deaths of many Germans in Dresden, might be seen as a commentary on more contemporary conditions: a lesson on the horrors of war in any age.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Second World War was perhaps *the* signal event for a generation of American writers, whose novels in the 1940s, '50s, '60s, and '70s attempted to grapple with the effects of the conflict and the new political and social realities of the Cold War. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, published in 1961, was a comic novel and investigation of war. Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1963 and 1973) were large, complex works, using labyrinthine plots and comic and surreal passages to come to terms with war's dislocation and violence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death*
- **When Written:** 1968
- **Where Written:** Iowa City, IA
- **When Published:** 1969
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary and postmodern American fiction
- **Genre:** Postmodern novel, comic novel, science fiction
- **Setting:** Germany during World War II; Ilium, New York, in the 1950s and 1960s
- **Climax:** Billy Pilgrim and his fellow POWs gather underneath Slaughterhouse-Five during the Allied attack on Dresden and survive the firebombing
- **Antagonist:** Roland Weary, Paul Lazzaro
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient, with frequent intrusions by the author/narrator, Kurt Vonnegut

EXTRA CREDIT

Self-reference. *Slaughterhouse-Five* includes another feature often associated with postmodern fiction: self-reference, or the acknowledgment of the book's fiction as the book takes place. Vonnegut uses self-reference throughout the novel to call into question the truth of his and Billy Pilgrim's report of the Dresden bombings. The technique helps to decrease the distance between the author, protagonist, and reader.

Continued popularity. Vonnegut's books continue to be read in the United States and around the world, often, first, by young people. Vonnegut was concerned with the critical reception of his novels—he did not want to be considered strictly a "young person's" novelist, nor a "science fiction writer." But it is the blend of all these elements that make his voice distinctive and exciting.

PLOT SUMMARY

Kurt Vonnegut wishes to write a novel about the firebombing of Dresden, which he witnessed as an American POW and survived by hiding in a **slaughterhouse**. Vonnegut contacts his

friend Bernard O'Hare, but they cannot remember much about the bombing. They later visit Dresden and walk through the reconstructed city together.

Vonnegut begins the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man who has "come unstuck in time" and who was also captured in the Battle of the Bulge, taken prisoner by the Germans, and kept in a slaughterhouse during the Dresden bombings. Two narratives emerge: the first details Billy's meeting of Roland Weary, an unruly fellow soldier, their farcical capture by the Germans, transfer via railcar to a POW camp, and later transfer to Dresden, a city that appears safe from Allied bombing because it has no war industry. Along the way, Weary, who has sustained foot injuries from poor shoes given him by the Germans, dies and blames Billy. Paul Lazzaro, another soldier, overhears Weary calling for vengeance against Billy and vows to kill Billy. Billy also meets Edgar Derby, a kind, middle-aged soldier who cares for him in the POW camp and is later executed for stealing a teapot from the rubble of Dresden.

In the second narrative, Billy travels through time, from his war experience to his youth to his post-war life and alien abduction. He has trained as an optometrist, married the daughter of another wealthy optometrist, and become successful in business. He and Valencia, his wife, have two children, Robert and Barbara. But in the 1960s Billy nearly dies in a plane crash in Vermont, and Valencia, coming to his aid, dies of carbon monoxide poisoning from a car wreck. After his plane crash, Billy announces he was abducted by Tralfamadorians, small, one-eyed, one-handed aliens with a peculiar philosophy of time. Tralfamadorians claim to see all events, past, present, and future, at the same time. This "four-dimensional" view of the universe informs their feelings on life, death, and fate, and Billy begins espousing these ideas publically. He later becomes a famed orator in the 1970s, and is killed by a henchman dispatched by Lazzaro, just as Lazzaro vowed in the war.

While convalescing during a mental breakdown in his last year of optometry school just after the war, Billy meets Eliot Rosewater, a fellow patient, who introduces him to the science fiction of Kilgore Trout. These books present many radical ideas about the future, time, **Jesus**, and history, some of which are repeated by the Tralfamadorians and by Vonnegut himself. During another hospital stay, this time after his plane crash, Billy meets Rumfoord, an historian and professor who is putting together a book on World War II but has trouble believing that Billy was really present during the firebombing of Dresden.

A **barbershop quartet** at Billy's 18th wedding anniversary party reminds him of the four German soldiers who stayed with the Americans in Slaughterhouse-Five. Shortly after the war ends Billy is shipped back to America. But before he goes Billy and other POWs take turns digging out and later incinerating bodies in the rubble, including the body of Edgar Derby. Vonnegut and O'Hare were also present, and in relating this story Vonnegut has managed to recall details from the war and satisfy the novel's initial aim: to describe the horrors of Dresden's bombings and of war generally.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Billy Pilgrim – The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim is an optometrist and former chaplain's assistant in the US Army who has "come unstuck in time," meaning he can travel between moments in his life. Billy was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge and shipped from a POW camp to Dresden, where he survived the Allied firebombing by hiding in **Slaughterhouse**-Five. After the war Billy married Valencia, a well-off daughter of an optometrist, went into business, became successful, and had two children, Barbara and Robert. After a plane crash that nearly kills him and results indirectly in the death of his wife as she travels to see him in the hospital, Pilgrim announces he was once captured by aliens, the Tralfamadorians, and taught their philosophy of life, death, and time. A vision of a **barbershop quartet** at an anniversary party prompts further reminiscences about Dresden.

Kurt Vonnegut – The author of the novel, Kurt Vonnegut was also taken as a POW during the Battle of the Bulge and survived the firebombing of Dresden in **Slaughterhouse**-Five. In the opening and closing chapters of the novel Vonnegut details his struggle in writing the novel, and his hope that he might make sense of the bombing's carnage—and produce a "big hit." At several points in the story Vonnegut inserts himself into the narrative, claiming that he was there, a witness to the events of the novel.

Bernard O'Hare – Vonnegut's friend from World War II, who also hid in the **slaughterhouse** during the bombing, O'Hare finds it difficult to recall memories of Dresden. He travels back to Germany with Vonnegut in the late 1960s in order to retrace his steps, and the two enjoy themselves as they tour a partially-reconstructed Dresden.

Roland Weary – An antisocial, bullying young soldier from Pittsburgh, Roland Weary survives a German attack on his unit and stumbles on two scouts, with whom he imagines he has teamed to form "The Three Musketeers." Weary also finds Billy and drags him along behind enemy lines, but the scouts are killed by Germans and Weary and Billy are captured. Weary is given ill-fitting shoes by the Germans and later dies of gangrene in his feet. He vows revenge against Billy, whom he blames for his death.

Tralfamadorians – Small aliens with one hand and an eye in the palm, the Tralfamadorians, from the planet Tralfamadore, abduct Billy after the war and hold him captive many millions of miles from earth. They keep Billy in a zoo and observe his daily activities and interactions with Montana Wildhack, a movie star

who is also abducted. The Tralfamadorians see the world in four dimensions, and to them all moments in time—past, present, and future—exist simultaneously. This informs the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life, death, war, and fate.

Edgar Derby – A middle-aged English teacher from Indianapolis, Edgar Derby is a passionate, upright, and courageous soldier who cares for Billy when he falls ill in the German POW camp. Derby later defends American ideals to Howard W. Campbell, Jr., and is executed for stealing a teapot amid the rubble of Dresden.

Kilgore Trout – An obscure science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout writes novels full of good ideas and bad writing, and is in some sense a caricature of Kurt Vonnegut, whose early writings were exercises in science fiction. Trout's novels, with their reference to aliens, **Jesus and the cross**, and alternate futures, make an impression on Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim, and many of their details become details of Billy's life and Vonnegut's narrative.

Bertram C. Rumfoord – A 70-year-old Harvard professor and the official Air Force Historian, Bertram C. Rumfoord recuperates from a skiing injury in the bed next to Billy, who has recently been in his plane crash. Rumfoord at first does not believe that Billy was present at the firebombing of Dresden, and only grudgingly acknowledges the horrors Billy must have seen.

Wild Bob – A colonel in the Army who is taken prisoner and placed in a railcar, Wild Bob has double pneumonia and eventually dies of his illness. He tells all to ask for him in Cody, Wyoming, where they might meet again; this becomes a refrain repeated in the novel, by Vonnegut and others.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Paul Lazzaro – A criminal from Illinois, Paul Lazzaro holds Weary as he dies and vows to take revenge on Billy, Weary's supposed "killer." Lazzaro does in fact have Billy killed in the 1970s, long after the war is over.

Valencia Pilgrim – Billy's wife and the heiress to a small optometry fortune, Valencia loves Billy deeply. In her panic after hearing of Billy's plane crash, Valencia is involved in a minor car accident that eventually causes her death from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Barbara and Robert Pilgrim – Billy's daughter and son. Barbara takes care of Billy after his plane crash and believes he is senile when he begins talking of his Tralfamadorian abduction. Robert, a troubled youth in high school, becomes a successful member of the Green Berets fighting in Vietnam.

Eliot Rosewater – Lying in a hospital bed next to Billy during his mental breakdown after the war, Eliot Rosewater introduces Billy to Kilgore Trout's science fiction and speaks kindly to Billy's mother when Billy refuses to listen.

Werner Gluck – A very young German solider, Werner Gluck leads Billy and Derby to the **slaughterhouse** kitchen and where they accidentally happen upon a group of young women showering. This is the first time he has seen a naked woman.

Howard W. Campbell, Jr. – An American turncoat who has become a propagandist for the Nazi war cause, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., writes books on the rudeness of American GIs and tries to convince the POWs to fight with the Germans against Russia. Derby argues with Campbell and defends America's ideals.

Mary O'Hare – Bernard's wife, Mary urges Vonnegut to show in his novel that war is fought by very young men—children. Vonnegut agrees and promises to subtitle the novel "The Children's Crusade."

Lily – Rumfoord's 23-year-old fifth wife, Lily brings her husband books in the hospital and pretends to read from President Truman's announcement of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, though she is a poor reader.

The hobo –Also a POW corralled into a railcar, the hobo claims that his treatment at the hands of the Germans is "not so bad." The hobo later dies and his boots are stolen.

Montana Wildhack –An American film star, Montana is abducted by the Tralfamadorians as a companion to Billy. They have a child together in the Tralfamadorian zoo where they are kept.

The Englishmen – POWs captured at the beginning of the war, the Englishmen create a small fantasy-land within their prison camp, putting on performances, stockpiling excess food, and generally ignoring the horrors of the war raging outside.

Maggie White – A young woman whom Kilgore Trout talks to at Billy Pilgrim's 18th wedding anniversary party. When Trout tells Maggie that God knows all the good and bad things she thinks and says, and will use that information on Judgment Day, she gets scared and leaves the party.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WAR AND DEATH

Slaughterhouse-Five is an attempt by the author, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., to come to terms with the firebombing of Dresden, which killed over 100,000 Germans, mostly civilians, and destroyed one of Europe's most beautiful cities. He does this through description of his own war experience, and through the narrative of Billy Pilgrim, a

fictional character whose path occasionally intersects Vonnegut's.

Different characters experience war and death in different ways. Vonnegut, in Chapter One, reconnects with an old war friend (Bernard O'Hare) whose wife Mary is angry with Vonnegut. She fears he will portray war as a contest between heroes and not what it truly is, the slaughter of young men. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist, is a chaplain's assistant sent to the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 and eventually taken prisoner by the Germans. The **slaughterhouse** where animals are killed in Dresden ends up protecting Billy and others, but it is revealed that many other shelters have collapsed and killed those inside. Later Billy's wife, Valencia, is killed by carbon monoxide inhalation while driving to see her husband, who has nearly died in a plane crash in Vermont. Edgar Derby, a middle-aged schoolteacher who takes care of Billy in the POW camp, is executed for stealing a teapot at the close of the war. Paul Lazzaro, claiming to avenge Weary's death (which Weary blames on Pilgrim), vows to kill Pilgrim in the future.

But the novel is not nihilistic in its representations of war and violence. In fact it presents two philosophies of death that eventually intertwine. The first, represented by the phrase "So it goes," indicates that death is a part of life—something that cannot be helped. The second is the Tralfamadorian view of life "in four dimensions," the fourth being time. Because Tralfamadorians see all moments of life (and of literature) as existing at the same time, one is capable of moving between moments of life and death—capable of becoming "unstuck in time." This motivates the novel's acceptance of death as part of life.

TIME, TIME-TRAVEL, AND FREE WILL

The first sentence of Chapter Two illustrates the importance of time in the novel: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time." Vonnegut attempts one form of time-travel, memory, in his conversations with O'Hare about the war. But they find their memories are incomplete. The novel's second option, then, is actual travel through time. Billy Pilgrim can do this because he has learned of Tralfamadorian time, where the past, present, and future exist at once.

Time in the novel is subjective, or determined by those experiencing it. For example, the British POWs in Germany, captured at the beginning of the war, have established a "timeless" prison camp. For them, the monotony of daily life has insulated them from history and the war "outside." On the other hand, Valencia and Barbara, Billy's daughter, serve to mark "normal," lived time. Barbara perceives life as linear and is angered by Billy's claims of a four-dimensional universe.

Billy's life of hospitalizations and violence present a kind of eternal recurrence: the same events occur again and again. Thus Tralfamadorian time becomes the novel's time. Events are not presented as a direct, linear narrative but are instead jumbled, recounted partially and filled in later. Tralfamadorian novels, of which Vonnegut's might be an imitation, are to be read "all at once," with "no beginning, no middle, no end." Because all time can be seen simultaneously, all events have already happened. Thus "free will" in the novel does not exist. As the Tralfamadorians say, "There is no why." Events that will take place in the future are the same as events taking place now, and as Billy learns, it is up to human beings to enjoy life's most pleasurable moments.

SCIENCE FICTION AND ALIENS

Vonnegut uses science fiction and aliens as means of knitting together events in Billy Pilgrim's life, and of enabling philosophical discussions about the nature of time and death. Vonnegut was a science fiction writer early in his career, and Kilgore Trout, a character in the novel who is an obscure and crude writer of wildly imaginative science fiction, might be seen as a caricature of Vonnegut. The author comments that Rosewater and Pilgrim, ravaged by war, need the "fresh start" of science fiction in order to build a new world amidst the rubble of the old. Similarly, the Tralfamadorian aliens become a part of Pilgrim's life and enable him to see his own mortality in a new and, ultimately, optimistic way.

Science fiction is also contrasted with the other "fictions" that characters in the novel use to live in the face of extreme violence. The Englishmen embrace Cinderella, play-acting, and fantasy in their POW camp, insulated from the horrors of war. Valencia's ideas of domestic bliss are punctured by Billy's plane crash and her own death by asphyxiation. The **crucifixion of Jesus** is reinterpreted by Kilgore Trout in order to rebuild the Christian faith on a more "persuasive" story. And the larger topic of Vietnam is described, by Vonnegut, as an exercise in political fantasy: an unjust war justified by those in power. In this sense, science fiction enables important truths about death, life, and time to be revealed, while the "real life" presented to Billy Pilgrim often involves fantasy, delusion, and fiction.

MONEY AND SUCCESS

The novel contains a meditation on the nature of success. Vonnegut and O'Hare are both wealthy in the late 1960s, during the novel's composition. Vonnegut never expected to have any money, yet he hopes his "Dresden novel" will be a big hit. Kilgore Trout, then, is Vonnegut's foil, since his books are barely read by the public. But Trout's ideas, which begin as fictions, are central to the philosophical investigations of the novel.

Pilgrim is not a good soldier. No one wants to lie near him on the railcar; he appears even to be a bad sleeper. But in later life

he becomes a successful optometrist and marries Valencia, daughter of another successful optometrist. After his experiences with the Tralfamadorians it is shown, briefly, that Billy has become a famous speaker on the nature of time and death. Billy's son Robert is a "success," a soldier in the Green Berets in Vietnam, though he has become, in essence, a well-trained killer. Neither Vonnegut nor Pilgrim valorizes this kind of success.

These investigations of money and success lead to the larger issues of the war, and intertwine with the other themes. Was the firebombing of Dresden a "success"? In a small sense it was, since of course the unarmed citizens could mount no defense. But in a larger sense, the Allies have succeeded only in proving the futility and barbarity of war. Similarly, despite Pilgrim's successes after the war, he appears to find purpose in life only after meeting with the Tralfamadorians. They show him the true nature of time, the inconsequence of his activities on earth, and the importance of enjoying the pleasant moments in the life he has led.

WITNESS AND TRUTH

The novel returns, again and again, to a theme of witness and truth. Vonnegut announces in Chapter One that he is trying to write an account of the Dresden firebombing. Vonnegut evokes the disruption and strangeness of war by disturbing the linear narrative of the novel itself, and by increasing the "unreal" nature of the story. The author later follows Billy's associations of the **barbershop quartet** to track his memories about the war. Thus the tools of fiction, paradoxically, become the tools of presenting truth.

Many characters question Pilgrim's alien abduction, but the truths revealed by the Tralfamadorians bear on the rest of the novel. Billy's experience on Tralfamadore, in a prison where is displayed as a zoo animal, similarly mixes truth and fiction. He is "mated" to a movie star and placed in a terrarium. They have a real child on Tralfamadore, and though he has been kidnapped only for a short while, time on Tralfamadore contains a whole experience of living with, and growing to love, Montana Wildhack.

The novel also makes small references to the Holocaust. What we know about the Holocaust is the result of immense, decades-long acts of witness. Vonnegut's discussion of the Dresden firebombing similarly wishes to dramatize their horrors in order that future violence might be prevented. The end of the novel starkly captures this spirit. The final scene, presented partially as Billy's memory, is also a memory of Vonnegut's: burying the bodies of Dresden in mass graves, and when those graves are full, burning the bodies with flamethrowers. It is an image Vonnegut has taken the whole novel to give us—a report of what events "really were" on the ground in Dresden. And though it is a shocking scene, it is a successful act of reporting and bearing witness. Vonnegut has finally given us access to his experience in Dresden.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

Although **Slaughterhouse-Five** as a physical space only appears in the novel in a few sections, it is a powerful symbol running through the entire work. It is, ironically, in this slaughterhouse where animals were killed and butchered that Billy, Derby, Lazzaro, and others are spared from the slaughter taking place outside: the firebombing of Dresden by Allied (US and UK) forces. But Billy is only protected by the slaughterhouse for so long: he eventually dies on Lazzaro's order, in the 1970s, and his life between the war and his death is punctuated by violence and loss. Derby emerges from the slaughterhouse but is tried and executed for petty theft only days later. And Dresden, the larger "slaughterhouse" of Germany, becomes the novel's great and silent tragedy. Rumfoord, writing his own history, seeks more information about the bombings, as does Vonnegut as he researches his novel. Yet the more that is learned about the physical Slaughterhouse-Five, and about the Allied firebombings in Dresden, the more difficult it becomes to write about the horror of these events. Thus it has taken Vonnegut twenty-three years to compose his fragmented, time-shifting novel, and the book ends with the incineration of bodies that were not able to find a safe-haven from battle.

JESUS AND THE CROSS

Jesus and the **cross** are important symbols in the novel, and are repeated numerous times both in the frame narrative (Vonnegut's attempt to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*) and in the story of Billy Pilgrim. Billy, whose last name is a reference to those who take trips for religious purposes (pilgrimages), is a chaplain's assistant in the war, and though he was not religious as a child, he grew up with a crucifix on his wall. In a book written by Kilgore Trout, Elie Rosewater reads about a group of Tralfamadorian-like aliens who, in a re-writing of the Gospels, insist that Jesus be a "nobody," a person of little influence, since God's saving of a nobody would be a more powerful and more helpful message on which to base a religion. Later, Billy stumbles upon a Trout novel in a bookstore that references Jesus and his father, a carpenter, who are invited by a Roman soldier to build a "device" to kill "a rabble-rouser." In this way Jesus and his father actually develop the cross used in the crucifixion. Jesus represents a figure who, like Pilgrim, is capable of "moving through time," acting as a messenger

between the divine and human worlds. The crucifixion represents Jesus' violent death, which was fated and predicted by Jesus himself (just as Billy knows his own death is coming).

BARBERSHOP QUARTET

Again, although the **barbershop quartet** only appears in a few places in the novel, it is an important link between the worlds Billy Pilgrim inhabits—in which he is "stuck" and "unstuck." Billy does not understand why, during his and Valencia's wedding anniversary party, he is shaken by the sight of four men singing together. Later these four men will sing on the plane that, in crashing, nearly kills Billy and sets off, indirectly, Valencia's death. Only after remembering—not traveling through time—does Billy see that the barbershop quartet resembles the four German soldiers standing together, along with the 100 US POWs, in the slaughterhouse during the bombing. Kilgore Trout picks up on the importance of this connection, claiming he knows that Billy is seeing through a "time window." And indeed the quartet triggers a cascade of connections between Billy's past in the war, his violent life afterward, and his investigations of time under the influence of the Tralfamadorians.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dell edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* published in 1991.

Chapter 1 Quotes

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

From the beginning, Vonnegut's narrator - who identifies as Vonnegut himself - is concerned with representing the truth of what happened to him, and to people he knew, in the Second World War. Vonnegut claims that he wishes to write a book about WWII from the perspective of someone in Dresden during the firebombings. Vonnegut believes that this part of the war has not be given its due - neither from the perspective of Americans trapped there during it, nor from the German perspective. Many innocent people were killed by the Allied attack on the city of Dresden, which the Allies claimed was also an important military target.

But Vonnegut is less concerned with assigning guilt or innocence to those who acted in the war. Instead, he looks to find the "truth" of the events he saw - how time happened, how people perceived things in the world. This is why Vonnegut has trouble starting the book, and even with writing it as a "fiction." This is why he inserts himself into his own attempt to fictionalize a very real atrocity.

"Well, I *know*," she said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful . . . ."

Related Characters: Mary O'Hare (speaker), Kurt Vonnegut

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Mary O'Hare provides a much-needed perspective for Vonnegut, as he meets with his friend O'Hare and attempts to recollect, and research, how the war felt from the relative comfort of the 1960s. Mary understands that the tendency of fiction, especially of fiction describing war, is to make some sides into heroes, others into villains. This tendency, for Mary, is to be avoided at all costs. Making war "look wonderful," in this conception, means that the war is not being told truthfully.

Vonnegut seems to take Mary's advice to heart. For the rest of the book, he does not spare the vivid and difficult details of war. He does not flinch from what is hard to explain, or from what, indeed, seems impossible. Of course, Vonnegut also inserts science-fictional elements into his narrative. He does this knowing that it will distort the superficial "truth-value" of the things he says. But he also does so to find another, deeper emotional truth - something that Mary appears to hold dear in her conversations with O'Hare and Vonnegut.

I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This section indicates several things about Vonnegut's character, and about his temperament as an author. First, Vonnegut has a profound, and serious, sense of humor. Of course no father would instruct his sons to commit atrocities in wartime - in this way, Vonnegut is not telling his children anything they do not already know. But in saying the obvious, Vonnegut is also pointing up the horrors of the war through which he himself lived. Because there were, of course, men to whom these warnings were not obvious - the atrocities were, after all, committed (and are still being committed all around the world).

Vonnegut is also a writer of deep moral purpose, whose concern with the balance and tone of his sentences is far less than his concern for the impact of his words. This is not to say that Slaughterhouse-Five is not an elegant novel - it is. But it is not polished in the manner of some fictions. It has, instead, the immediacy of speech, of words spoken from one person to another.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most famous phrases in a novel full of famous phrases. Coming "unstuck in time" means losing the narrative order of one's life. It can be a scary process - Pilgrim himself wonders how it is possible - but it can also be a liberating one. For Pilgrim, the coming unstuck happens because of his interactions with the Tralfamadorians, who tell him of their world and their perceptions, which are not limited to the three dimensions of human perception.

Vonnegut also uses "coming unstuck" as a way of moving through the novel he has created. He does not always rely on strict narrative chronology. Instead, he purposefully disrupts this chronology - he attempts to tell Pilgrim's story, and the story of the war, and his own life's story at the same time, using whatever means are necessary, and ignoring the sequential logic of some accounts. Vonnegut does this not because he wants to confuse the reader, but because he wants to break down the reader's expectations for how time, in fiction and in life, ought to function.

He didn't look like a solider at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Vonnegut notes that Pilgrim has very little of the soldier about him - and he does so throughout the text. In this, Pilgrim is exactly not like the "heroes" Mary O'Hare fears Vonnegut might use to populate his text. Instead, Pilgrim is a man swept into war without really choosing that war, and without knowing how to fight. For Pilgrim, war is a set of confusions one might survive. It is not about tactics or the defeat of the enemy - it is about desperate self-preservation.

Again, Vonnegut displays his humor here. Despite the horrors of the war and the genuine fear, on Pilgrim's part, that he might die, the scene is played for laughs. Vonnegut's black or "gallows" humor is one of the text's primary features, and it is another way that Vonnegut tries to portray war fully - to show that, even in war, people recognized the ludicrousness of their situations, often as they unfolded.

Five German soldiers and a police dog on a leash were looking down into the bed of the creek. The soldiers' blue eyes were filled with a bleary civilian curiosity as to why one American would try to murder another one so far from home, and why the victim should laugh.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Roland

Weary, Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Vonnegut, in this passage, describes the fight between Pilgrim and Weary, and shows how arbitrary the animosities of war can be. For, of course, the Germans and the Americans are enemies and should be fighting one another. The Americans, on the other hand, have no business fighting among themselves, at least according to official Army regulations.

But war is really a set of artificial constraints, especially in the way Vonnegut depicts it. The Germans do not necessarily, or in fact seldom, have personal grudges against the Americans. And the Americans, despite their general understanding that Nazi Germany has committed crimes of its own, do not necessarily believe that each and every German is their "natural" enemy. In fact, what Vonnegut takes pains to show is how bizarre and outlandish the notion of a "natural" enemy is. In Slaughterhouse-Five, men only have accidental, or provisional, enemies - enemies brought on by the circumstances in which people find themselves.

Chapter 3 Quotes

But lying on the black ice there, Billy stared into the patina of the corporal's boots, saw Adam and Eve in the golden depths. They were naked. They were so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently. Billy Pilgrim loved them.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an indication of both the whimsy and the religious seriousness of Vonnegut's writing. This scene is played, in part, for laughs - as, of course, Pilgrim couldn't "actually" see Adam and Eve in the boots of the soldier standing over him. But Vonnegut is not so much concerned with the explicit possibility or impossibility of the scenes he describes. For him, the validity of what Pilgrim believes he saw is the same as what someone might have "reported" from a given scene. Perception and external reality are described on equal footing throughout the text.

The story of Adam and Eve is, of course, a commonly-referenced one - if not the most commonly-referenced in Western literature. Yet it is almost certainly the case that no author has described Adam and Eve viewed in exactly this context - amid the horrors of war, in the polish of a boot. Vonnegut's ability to make new even the most tried-and-true of tropes is another feature of his writing.

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.

Related Characters: Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

This prayer for serenity, and for acknowledgement of what is and is not in someone's power, is a common one - it did not originate with Vonnegut, and it has been used in other contexts since Slaughterhouse-Five. But the prayer has a particular resonance for Vonnegut's novel. Because in the text, there are in fact some things that people might not necessarily believe are open to being changed - like, for example, narrative time - and these things are changed over the course of the novel, most famously in the notion that Billy Pilgrim has "come unstuck in time."

What Vonnegut appears to be saying, then, is more complex than what one might typically associate with this serenity prayer. Vonnegut, with his characteristic irony, wants in fact to encourage people to consider changing, or at least to look at anew, parts of their lives they thought to be set in stone, immutable. Thus Pilgrim is able to move through his past and into his future - things no human "should" be able to do.

Human beings in there were excreting into steel helmets, which were passed to the people at the ventilators . . . . The human beings also passed canteens, which guards would fill with water. When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Vonnegut takes great pains to illustrate exactly the human difficulties of the war. In this scene, war forces people together under the most horrific and cramped of circumstances. For Vonnegut, however, the scene does not end there. Instead, the humans forced into the same train-car are part of a shared experience, and they do not immediately turn on one another, or hurt one another. While acknowledging the frailty of their positions and their discomfort, they nevertheless participate in a communal series of excretions and ingestions, designed to keep them alive.

This is why *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not simply a book about death and the horrors of war. It is instead about the extremities of war, and about the good and the bad that can come from putting people into life-testing, and life-affirming, situations. Vonnegut continually forces the reader to confront situations in which characters are confronting the reality of their physical circumstances - of the dire, yet hopeful, straits they are placed in.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some . . . . The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. . . . Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

This is another, very important instance of "coming unstuck in time." The planes from the film quite literally become what they were. The horrors of war, the violence into which characters are thrust, is run back, and pain, once the end position, is now the beginning. Humans and objects are allowed to escape their own destruction. The clock is wound back.

Part of Vonnegut's theory of time and free will depends on the fiction writer's ability to move quickly between situations that would unfold chronologically in life. Thus, although the violence of war is one-directional, going from completeness to destruction, the violence in this scene is allowed to run the opposite way.

The reasons for this are not stated explicitly - but the Tralfamadorians, Vonnegut's theorists of time, make clear that, once time is seen as operating in more than one direction, human suffering is understood in a vastly different light. It is seen as one part of the human condition, rather than as the necessary end-point of war and conflict.

❝ Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*.

Related Characters: Tralfamadorians (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is another take on what it means to be in, and outside of, time. For the Tralfamadorians, time appears like the side of a mountain ridge - a series of peaks and valleys, which can be traversed at will. To humans, of course, time seems unidirectional and impossible to stop. But for Billy Pilgrim, who is "unstuck," time assumes the qualities of Tralfamadorian time.

Interestingly, then, Pilgrim is "trapped" in time when speaking to the Tralfamadorians - but in a manner different from normal human "entrapment" in time. Humans are trapped in time without knowing it. They are imprisoned in a present, and can view the past and speculate on the future. But they do not have the ability to traverse these moments. Pilgrim, however, in speaking to the Tralfamadorians, is able to understand just how the "present" is like an "amber" (sticky sap) in which one is stuck - and how one might move forward or backward to different moments at will.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene . . . . There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Tralfamadorian fiction is, in many ways, a manifesto for Tralfamadorian time itself, and a means of understanding how Vonnegut attempts to play with time throughout Slaughterhouse-Five. If the images of the novel can be "seen at once," then they congeal, in Tralfamadorian fiction. This relates to Pilgrim's "unstuckness" in time, his ability to move from one moment to another, forward and backward, without reference to the supposed linearity of a human life.

Vonnegut is a "postmodern" novelist to the extent that he plays with notions of self-reference - instances when a novel indicates to itself and to the reader that it is in fact a novel, not "real life." That Vonnegut includes within *Slaughterhouse-Five* a character named Kilgore Trout, who is a writer of science fictions, points to Vonnegut's awareness that he, too, is writing a form of science fiction. Trout also stands as a slightly satirized version of a "hack" sci-fi writer, who churns out titles regularly.

The British had no way of knowing it, but the candles and the soap were made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State. So it goes.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

With his characteristic directness, Vonnegut reminds the reader of the grim reality of the war. One feature, long rumored even during the time of the conflict, was that Germans were boiling the fat of prisoners to make soap, then passing along this soap to be sold. For Vonnegut, this rumor - which he includes as a part of the narrative - assumes both a literal and a metaphoric form. Literally, it is a sign of the terrible cruelty of the war, of its human cost.

Metaphorically, Vonnegut uses this scene to comment on the impossibility of getting, and remaining, clean during a conflict as all-consuming as this one. For even in the shower a person is "cleansing" oneself with the soap from another human body. As with other instances in the novel, war is a game in which no one can emerge innocent or unscathed, even the "good guys" (who are, in this case, the Allies).

And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes. So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim, Eliot Rosewater

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut makes a serious justification of the social impact of science fiction. He argues that writers like Pilgrim and Trout are invested in sci-fi not simply because it is an interesting way to think about the world and its future - although it is that, too. Vonnegut argues that science fiction can be a vehicle for social change - a way of imagining how problems might be solved, a way of constructing another universe in which humans might live.

This is another example of Vonnegut's self-reflexive commentary in Slaughterhouse-Five - his analysis of what it means to write a novel while writing a novel. Just as the novel itself is partially science fiction - and therefore concerned with creating a new world - Vonnegut's characters write novels that envision and create new worlds in which peace might be possible, in which the wars of the 20th century might be left behind. Both Vonnegut and Trout are therefore engaged in the same utopian act of writing.

Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, "Oz." That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut writes himself directly into the novel as a character. Throughout, we have been reminded that Billy Pilgrim is not "real" in the sense of historical "reality." He is not a character one could find in a work of history, because he did not live - although Pilgrim is "real" in the sense that Vonnegut establishes and fleshes him out in the context of the novel.

But Vonnegut is real both as an author and historical person - the man who wrote the book - and as a character within it. His response to Dresden, a city he had until that point never seen, underscores his youth and inexperience, and the grandeur of a Europe he is about to witness destroyed. Characteristically, also, Vonnegut changes his own grammar, saying "That was I" and "That was me," searching for the appropriate way to convey what he had seen.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Tralfamadorians, of course, saw that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Tralfamadorians

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Vonnegut argues here that, for a human, there can be no more damning fate than to be compared to a machine. Machines, by this logic, are unthinking, unfeeling. They have no souls, they are operated by others - they are robots.

But Vonnegut argues, via the Tralfamadorians, that there is more to being a machine than this. A machine is any complex system that operates in response to the world. By this definition, of course human beings are machines, along with all other living things, plants and animals alike.

There is, by this second definition, no shame at all in being compared to a machine. Indeed, for the Tralfamadorians, machine-hood is what connects people, plants, and animals - it is the glue that binds life together in the first place, both on earth and on other planets. Thus they insist that humans are machines even when humans insist they are organic matter "opposed" to machine-hood.

❝ Billy thrust it into the vat, turned it around and around, making a gooey lollipop. He thrust it into his mouth . . . and then every cell in Billy's body shook him with ravenous gratitude and applause.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

When Billy finds this enormous vat of sugar, he has not eaten for days, and his body is about to fall apart. In this way, Vonnegut links Pilgrim's appetites to the discussion of machine-hood, above - Pilgrim is, after all, a person who needs food in order to survive, and war has created a set of circumstances in which food is terribly hard to come by.

The scene is also a comic one, another in a sequence of many throughout the novel, in which a man's serious problems (in this case, hunger) are contrasted with the humorous circumstances of wartime conflict and restriction. It may not have been funny to Pilgrim at the time, to eat an enormous lollipop in the throes of terrible hunger. But the scene is revealed to be a humorous one in its recounting. This links to Vonnegut's continual assertion of "so it goes" - that even the worst events in human life will be followed by other, sometimes funnier events.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ He spoke of the brotherhood between the American and the Russian people, and how those two nations were going to crush the disease of Nazism, which wanted to infect the whole world. The air-raid sirens of Dresden howled mournfully.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Edgar Derby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Derby is fighting against the horrible speech delivered by a man named Campbell, a defector from the American cause who wears a "red-white-and-blue swastika" on his armband, and who believes that the only way for the Americans to finish the war is by banding together with the Germans.

Derby, who has not spoken out in this way through much of the novel, argues that the war really is a war of ideals, and that American and Russian ideals, different though they may be, must unite in order to defeat National Socialism. Derby's argument is perhaps not exactly the argument that Americans themselves would use - he probably overplays the natural alliance between America and the Soviet Union, who would themselves become enemies within a year of the war being over. But his speech nevertheless offers, in distilled form, an argument for freedom and democracy over terror, demagoguery, and fear.

❝ Trout, incidentally, had written a book about a money tree. It had twenty-dollar bills for leaves. Its flowers were government bonds . . . It attracted human beings who killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer. So it goes.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Kilgore Trout

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

This is another of the metaphors Vonnegut uses to describe human behavior. Here, Vonnegut depicts the persuasive power of human greed. Humans, in this example, will always flock to the money tree - they will always be drawn to the bills that fall from it. Even though these bills will appeal to humans, they will not be distributed equally, but will instead cause the humans to fight with one another, and eventually to kill each other. But this is okay for the money tree, because the dead bodies of humans can then be used to fertilize the tree and encourage it to grow more. This continues the cycle, producing more of the tree, and more money, and more humans who wish to take that money.

Vonnegut therefore establishes a symbolic basis for the capitalist system that, in the years after the war, sweeps across the world. It is a system that makes people (superficially) happy, but also one that causes great discord and strife - the very strife that "fertilizes" the system and allows it to continue.

❝ The rest of the guards had, before the raid began, gone to the comforts of their own homes in Dresden. They were all being killed with their families.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut takes up a very simple and tragic part of his story - that of the "dumbness" of luck, or fate. Those Germans who felt that they were putting themselves safely to bed - it was they who died in the air raid, as they could not have known that the Americans would strike in exactly the place where they felt most secure. Others, who did not have homes to go to, did wind up safe. Indeed, POWs, who were trapped in a barracks and therefore more or less protected from the Allied bombing (including Vonnegut), found themselves in the safest position of all, and survived an attack by their own army against German military and civilian populations.

Generally, in Vonnegut's account of the war, it is precisely when a person feels most safe that that person finds himself or herself in harm's way. War is the ultimate game of change - it cannot be regulated, or even explained - and it is difficult to describe. But war can absolutely be experienced, which is why Vonnegut attempts to convey World War II from as many different vantages as he does in the novel.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ The staff thought Rumfoord was a hateful old man, conceited and cruel. He often said to them . . . that people who were weak deserved to die. Whereas the staff, of course, was devoted to the idea that weak people should be helped as much as possible, that nobody should die.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Bertram C. Rumfoord

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Rumfoord, an army general who has been laid up in the hospital alongside others who have been wounded, has a theory of human strength and weakness that one finds throughout Vonnegut's novel - a theory that Vonnegut vehemently opposes. Rumfoord believes that war, like other

extreme human activities, can "sort" humans into categories of strength and weakness. In other words, Rumfood believes that war is an accurate bellweather for who should survive and who shouldn't, because it forces people to come to terms with the power of their own wills.

But for Vonnegut, this justification is basically absurd. War, in Vonnegut's rendering, is not at all about one's fate, or about being rewarded for heroism and punished for cowardice. In his novel, war is a machine of chance, of fate, where humans actually play a relatively small part. Cowards are often rewarded - like Rumfoord himself. And heroes often fall in battle, without even being recognized as heroes.

❝ Another one said that people couldn't read well enough anymore to turn print into exciting situations in their skulls . . . .

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Here is another one of Vonnegut's critiques of writing within the text, this one offered as a tongue-in-cheek argument for movies or radio as an alternative to the act of reading. While in the science fiction bookstore in Manhattan, Pilgrim comes across a great many science fiction novels that offer new possibilities for how the world might be, how humans might organize themselves in a society. But Pilgrim also realizes, as Vonnegut narrates, that a great many people in the United States are not interested in reading at all, or find it a chore in a world with a great many other media options.

This critique is still prevalent today, regarding different media - and Vonnegut takes pains, in the novel, to argue for just what exactly fiction can do - how it can manipulate time, moving forwards and backwards, in ways that are particular to it and less common in all but the most experimental films. In this way, fiction really is, for Vonnegut, a kind of training in new ways to see the world.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed. Still—if I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I'm grateful that so many of those moments are nice.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim, Tralfamadorians

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

Vonnegut returns to the narrative to begin the summary section of the novel, in which he describes his relationship to some of the characters whose lives he has depicted. Vonnegut argues that Tralfamadorian time implies that all human life extends infinitely in all directions, that it can be accessed at this or that point - that any human being, in other words, is capable of becoming unstuck in time, just like Pilgrim.

Indeed, Vonnegut has offered a world in the novel in which any reader can become unstuck right along with Pilgrim. The novel is a technology for accessing different moments, different memories. These are moments from Vonnegut's life, but the things Vonnegut describes are relatable to the context in which any given reader might live. The novel is therefore a kind of time machine in the Tralfamadorian model, showing us how humans behave at different points, shuttling constantly between them.

❝ "If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming," I said to him lazily, "just ask for Wild Bob."

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Wild Bob

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

This line, which Vonnegut repeats from earlier in the novel, is a bond between O'Hare and Vonnegut, of which Vonnegut is reminded on a trip back to Dresden with his friend in the 1960s. Wild Bob died of pneumonia in the prisoner train car, and in telling his fellow soldiers they could ask for him in Cody, he's saying that he will have a life

again, that he will be reborn - at least in memory - among the people of Cody.

Like "so it goes," this line, repeated by characters throughout Slaughterhouse-Five, is a reminder of the human element of war, and of the cost of war. Wild Bob was by all accounts a good man, and the life he led in Cody, his "real" life, was about as distant from his in Dresden as it could possibly be. Vonnegut and O'Hare think of Wild Bob when they think of the human souls the war took away - and the resilience and humor of those, like Wild Bob, who were not lucky enough to survive.

Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, "*Poo-tee-weet?*"

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Billy Pilgrim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

This is another of the most famous lines in the novel. Vonnegut here uses the sound of a bird chirping in the trees - played for comedic effect - as a reminder of the indifference of nature to the violence humans inflict on one another. The birds would sing in the trees whether humans were kind to one another or not. They will sing in the trees before and after atrocities are committed. They would have sung if Americans had lost the war, just as soon as they sang when the Americans won.

Vonnegut does this not to argue that these distinctions, between right and wrong, good and bad, don't matter - for him, they matter an enormous amount. But he does claim, in the indifference of nature, that good and bad occur in a world that does not necessarily arc toward the former or latter. Goodness and badness are matters of human choice in a greater world filled with arbitrariness and seeming bad luck. The choices that humans make are a small counterweight against the randomness and indifference of the events surrounding.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Kurt Vonnegut, the author and narrator, begins by stating that the story he is about to tell is true, "more or less." On a Guggenheim grant in 1967, Vonnegut traveled back to Dresden with a wartime friend, Bernard O'Hare, and asked a cab driver how the city has fared since the firebombing of 1944. The cab driver says the city is in good shape, mostly, and conditions under Communism have improved. The cab driver later mails O'Hare a letter expressing a desire to meet Vonnegut and O'Hare again "in a world of peace and freedom."

The novel's "frame story," or story that introduces another story, involves Vonnegut trying to recollect, with O'Hare, exactly what happened in Dresden during the war. This opening section also introduces in important element in the novel: its irony, or the distance between what the characters desire and what actually takes place. Here, the cab driver's wish for peace is undercut by the Vietnam War, which rages even as Vonnegut writes the book.

Since returning from Europe in 1945, Vonnegut has spent 23 years attempting to write a book about the firebombing of Dresden, which he witnessed as a prisoner of war (POW). When people ask what he is writing, he replies, often, that it is a book about Dresden. One friend says that he ought to write an anti-glacier book, instead of an anti-war book, since glaciers and wars are equally unstoppable.

This comparison of war and glaciers—that both are unstoppable—is a first instance of "fate" in the novel. One cannot stop something that is fated to happen. Later, the Tralfamadorians agree that war is a part of life, and it is impossible to thwart war—it will come despite all man's efforts.

Vonnegut flashes back to his first attempt, earlier in the composition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at contacting O'Hare, who is now a district attorney living in Pennsylvania. Vonnegut says he wishes to catch up with O'Hare and hear his memories about the war, for use in the book. O'Hare claims to remember little. Vonnegut plans to use the death of Edgar Derby, a character introduced later, as the book's climax: Derby was executed immediately following the firebombing for stealing a teapot amid the city's ruins.

This "climax" is never actually detailed in the novel. Instead we are given a fragmentary look at Derby's fate: we are told he is executed, and at the end of the novel we learn his body has been incinerated. Vonnegut plays with ideas of dramatic tension and climax throughout the book, since these are aspects of stories but not necessarily aspects of "real life," or non-fiction.

Vonnegut details an attempt to map the plot of his novel, which is becoming complex and unwieldy. He draws the map in crayon on the back of a strip of wallpaper. The end of the novel, in this version, is a field near Halle, where American and West European prisoners, including Vonnegut and O'Hare, are exchanged for Russians in a POW swap. After the swap, Vonnegut is sent to France and then to the US.

The map of the novel within the novel itself is an instance of "meta-fiction," or writing about writing. Vonnegut does this throughout as a means of getting at "the truth" of his topic. Vonnegut wishes to depict war as accurately as possible, but this means he cannot use a straightforward, linear narrative, since war is not experienced in a linear fashion.

Vonnegut describes his life since the war. He was an anthropology student at the University of Chicago and a police reporter for the Chicago City New Bureau. Once, while reporting on the accidental death of a man in an elevator, he tells a colleague that, as grisly as this death was, he saw "lots worse than that in the war." Vonnegut later works in public relations for General Electric in New York State, and writes to the Air Force for information about the Dresden bombings, only to be told those files remain top secret.

Vonnegut's response here, that he has seen worse, echoes what the hobo will later say on the railcar to the POW camp: that things could be even less comfortable, even more awful. This kind of resignation, like the novel's refrain "So it goes" when someone dies an untimely death, acknowledges the power of fate. If war is a necessary part of our world, then violence, too, is necessary, and one must become accustomed to its horrors, and realize that those horrors could always be more horrible.

Vonnegut returns to the story of his meeting with O'Hare, at O'Hare's house in Pennsylvania, in 1964. He and O'Hare are seated while their children play together. Mary O'Hare, Bernard's wife, appears upset as she prepares drinks for the men. Mary interrupts as they talk, saying Bernard and Vonnegut were "just babies" during the war. She asks Vonnegut not to make it seem, in his novel, that wars are fought by heroic men like John Wayne. Vonnegut promises to keep this in mind and vows to subtitle the work "The Children's Crusade."

Another refrain in the novel: the idea that the soldiers on both sides, Allied and German, are only "just children." If war is fought by young people but still planned by "adults," then young people themselves appear to have little control of their fates—the soldiers are pawns acted upon by larger forces. For instance Billy, in his confusion before being captured, later does not even know where the battle is taking place.

Vonnegut and O'Hare pick up a book on the crusades and read about the actual Children's Crusade, which began in 1213. Monks sent French and German children to North Africa and sold them into slavery, rather then shipping them to fight in Palestine, although some children sent to Genoa were aided by the locals and returned to their homes. The Crusades generally were quite bloody, but military gains by Europeans over generations were small.

When children are forced into battle by "adults," then the children are typically confused as to what the battle means. Vonnegut's historical reference, here, shows that war has been fought by children throughout history, and that Billy's confusion about battle is shared by many who have been told to fight.

Vonnegut reads passages from a book on Dresden in the O'Hare's guest bedroom. Dresden was under siege by the Prussians in 1760, and its partial destruction at the time was observed and described by many, including a young Goethe, who later became a famous German author.

Another instance of the history of destruction. Vonnegut uses Goethe, a writer of global stature, to reiterate that war cannot be stopped. Even Dresden, which is understood as a beautiful city, a jewel of Europe, has been wracked by violence and destruction previously.

Vonnegut and his daughters leave the O'Hares and visit the 1964 World's Fair in New York, where Vonnegut wonders at the future and the present: "how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep." Vonnegut writes his novel, this novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* largely in Iowa City, where he is a teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He tells his editor that the book is "so short and jumbled and jangled . . . because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." Vonnegut orders his sons not to participate in massacres or work for companies that make weapons for massacres.

The act of writing of the novel is again detailed. Vonnegut hopes that the novel, which he feels cannot be an "intelligent" critique of war, will nevertheless feel real to those who read it. He also hopes that the book will be judged a "masterpiece." The reference to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where Vonnegut really did teach, further underscores his concern that the book be received positively. He feels under pressure at Iowa to produce "great literature."

En route to Germany, where he is to meet O'Hare in 1967, Vonnegut's plane is delayed and he feels that time has slowed to a stop. Vonnegut describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, and the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt because she looked back at the destruction against God's wishes. Vonnegut says that people aren't supposed to look back, and that he is finished doing so. His next book will be "fun," and this one is a "failure." He closes the chapter by stating the first sentence of Chapter 2 and the last sentence of Chapter 10.

Ideas of success and failure return. Vonnegut believes that Slaughterhouse-Five is a failure but sees this failure as a necessary part of its mission—to describe the indescribability of war. At the same time he and O'Hare are financially secure in middle age; they have families. In this sense they are successful—more so than they could have ever imagined while avoiding the firebombing in Dresden.

CHAPTER 2

Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, has "come unstuck in time," meaning he can move freely from one period of his life to another. Vonnegut briefly details Billy's life: he was born in 1922 in Ilium, New York. He studied to be an optometrist for one semester before being drafted. He served in World War II, finished his optometry studies, became engaged to daughter of the owner of the optometry school, and "suffered a mild nervous collapse."

The introduction of Billy's time-traveling abilities. What it means to be "unstuck in time" will become clearer as the novel progresses. It is important, here, to distinguish between time-travel, of which Billy is capable, and the form of "time travel" that is provided by memory. Later in the novel Vonnegut will contrast these forms of "looking back."

After treatment for his breakdown, Billy married and took up his father-in-law's optometry business, becoming wealthy and having two children, Barbara and Robert, the latter becoming a Green Beret serving in Vietnam. In 1968, Billy is involved in a chartered-plane crash en route to an optometrists' conference; he is the sole survivor, though he suffers a grave head injury. His wife dies of carbon monoxide poisoning while Billy is hospitalized.

Another juxtaposition, or comparison, of Billy's success and misfortune. He makes quite a bit of money and has a family of his own, but that family is plagued by violence and death—he himself nearly dies in a plane crash, and this causes his wife's death indirectly. His son's participation in the war in Vietnam gives Billy some pause, although he does not feel the need to protest that war, as Vonnegut later describes.

After the accident, Billy goes on the radio in New York City, claiming he was abducted by aliens, the Tralfamadorians, in 1967, and displayed on Tralfamadore in a zoo. His daughter hears the broadcast and fears that Billy is now suffering from dementia after the plane crash. Billy later describes the Tralfamadorians, saying they are "two feet high, and green," shaped like a plunger, with a hand atop the shaft and an eye in their palm. Tralfamadorians perceive in four dimensions, meaning they "see" time differently from humans.

Billy's grip on reality is called into question; it is never clear whether the Tralfamadorians are creations of his imagination, ideas taken from Kilgore Trout novels, or actual experiences of Billy's. The description of the Tralfamadorians is less important, throughout the rest of the book, than their ability to see time "all together," as is here introduced.

Billy includes this information in a letter to the local newspaper. In a second letter, he details the Tralfamadorian concept of death: a Tralfamadorian looks at "different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains." All moments remain present to them. Barbara discovers Billy writing this letter in his ill-heated basement and worries again that he has become senile. She threatens to put him in a home and asks why he hasn't mentioned the Tralfamadorians until after his plane crash. Billy says the time was not yet "ripe."

More doubt is cast on Billy's mental state. The "Rocky Mountains" metaphor for time crops up multiple times throughout the novel. The peaks and valleys of one's life, seen all at once, appear, like the mountains, fixed and immoveable, unable to be changed. Thus the Tralfamadorian concept of time both allows one to see one's entire life and makes that life seem fated, impossible to change, like the mountains themselves.

Billy first became "unstuck in time" in 1944, during the war. He serves as a chaplain's assistant and therefore does not carry a weapon—he has received minimal military training. He instead plays a small portable organ and carries an altar for use in the field. At the end of his training in North Carolina, Billy is given emergency leave to attend the funeral of his father, who was killed in a hunting accident. About the death, Vonnegut writes the phrase he will use after every senseless death in the novel: "So it goes."

The phrase "So it goes" becomes one of the novel's great refrains—it is perhaps Slaughterhouse-Five's most recognizable sentence. The phrase is short but contains multiple readings. When someone dies, Vonnegut seems to comment that this death could not be helped. But the phrase also contains a kind of hope: that death itself isn't so bad, that all things must die, and that life must be lived in appreciation of its best moments.

Billy is then shipped to Luxembourg and to the fighting at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. He never meets the chaplain whom he is to help. Instead he is caught in the frenzy of fighting and walks, "dazed," behind enemy lines, where he runs into an American anti-tank gunner and two American scouts. Billy's shoe is missing a heel, and he lacks a proper uniform. He is nearly killed by a stray German bullet, as the Germans are patrolling the recently captured territory, but is convinced by Roland Weary, the gunner, to dive into a ditch.

Billy is, quite simply, a bad soldier. He is not prepared for war, does not carry a gun, and is totally disoriented by the collapse of the battle lines once the Germans have overrun the Allies at the famous Battle of the Bulge. Yet Billy is also "lucky." He is not killed by the stray bullet and is in fact saved by Weary. Weary seems to recognize Billy's luck, later, when Weary dies of gangrene and blames Billy for his own misfortune.

Weary, also new to combat, is the only survivor of German tank fire in his unit. Weary grew up "unpopular" in Pittsburgh because of his looks and violent temper, and his father collected instruments of torture, which Weary describes to Billy in the field. He explains a "blood gutter," or the trough on the side of a sword. It is revealed that, although Billy had a crucifix (**Jesus on the cross**) in his room as a child, his family was not religious.

Jesus occurs again and again in the novel, though not necessarily as an object of religious reverence—Billy himself does not feel religious, but he keeps the crucifix on his wall as a child. Jesus, later in the book, becomes instead a symbol of "otherworldliness," a character who travels between heaven and earth, and who develops the novel's ideas on fate, time, and what it means to die.

Weary, Pilgrim, and two scouts continue through the snow, hoping to avoid detection by the Germans. Weary shows Pilgrim a lewd photograph of a woman and a pony, which Weary bought in the Tuileries in France. Weary imagines aloud that he has survived the war and is narrating the story of his escape to his family: he and the two scouts, the "Three Musketeers," have avoided the Germans heroically. But Weary must stop daydreaming in order to double back and find Billy, who has fallen far behind.

Weary's fantasy of success involves the creation of a battle unit and friend group such as he never had growing up in Pittsburgh. Weary is greatly disheartened when this fantasy is disturbed. The lewd photograph, too, is "unstuck in time," seen by Billy here and much later, in an adult bookstore in New York City.

Pilgrim is leaning against a tree; this, according to Vonnegut, is when he "first comes unstuck in time." He is learning to swim with his father, who throws him in the pool; he is visiting his sick mother in a nursing home, when she asks him "How did I get so *old*?" He is at a banquet for his son's little league team. He is in a room with another woman, not his wife, at a party; he is drunk. He passes out in the back seat of his car and is woken up by Weary, back in the war.

Here time-travel, drunkenness, and aging are all combined. Billy's ability to travel through time is often prompted by states of tiredness, anxiety, or inebriation. His mother's question—"How did I get so old*?"—becomes a broader meditation on time itself. Even though we know time will pass, that it cannot be stopped, still we feel surprised at our own aging and mortality.*

Weary rescues Pilgrim by the tree, though Pilgrim wishes to be left behind or to "turn into steam" by the riverbank and drift away. The scouts abandon Weary and Pilgrim. Billy comes unstuck again and is giving a speech in front of the Lions Club—he is the new president and has become a confident public speaker. Weary begins beating and kicking Pilgrim on the ice of the frozen creek, and Pilgrim laughs. Five Germans discover them.

This scene deftly contrasts Billy's current, miserable state and his future success, if not complete happiness. Vonnegut uses Billy's time-traveling abilities to create these kinds of comparisons—between linear time and Tralfamadorian time, between success and failure, between violence and peacefulness.

CHAPTER 3

The Germans who come upon Weary and Pilgrim are part of the "mopping up" after the battle. Two of the five are very young (and beautiful), two are old, and one is ready to retire, a "good soldier" who possesses boots so well-shined one can "see Adam and Eve" in them. Pilgrim sees Adam and Eve as he lies, battered, on the ice.

Another religious reference, this time to Adam and Eve, the father and mother of humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Adam and Eve represent both a state of purity and the inevitability of "falling," or erring, which gets Adam and Eve kicked out of Paradise. It is their fate to wander the earth, as it is Billy's fate to "wander" through time.

Pilgrim is helped up by one of the beautiful young boys. The scouts who had abandoned Weary and Pilgrim are shot nearby as they wait to attack the Germans. Weary is disarmed by the Germans, who find his bullet-proof Bible and the lewd picture of the woman and pony. Weary's boots are given to the beautiful young boy, and he is given the boy's clogs. Weary and Pilgrim now both have inadequate footwear. The two are taken to a small cottage where other American POWs are housed. Pilgrim falls asleep on a chaplain, a rabbi, who has been "shot in the hand."

Weary is forced to exchange his boots, given him by the army, for a pair of clogs that will constrict his feet, cause gangrene, and ultimately kill him. This series of very small events, cascading into a catastrophic one, is typical of the novel. Death, when it comes, does not always occur in battle, or from a falling bomb. Derby instead is shot for an extremely minor offense, and Weary dies simply because his shoes don't fit. In these instances, Vonnegut highlights the cruelty of fate.

Billy comes unstuck in time. He is looking at a "jade green mechanical owl," part of the optometer he is using on a patient. He has just fallen asleep in the office. Pilgrim looks out the window at his car parked in the lot. A license plate is dated 1967 and Pilgrim wonders how the time has passed so quickly. He reads an article in an optometry review arguing for a "European Optometry Society" and is alarmed by a clock chiming noon. Then he is back in World War II. While marching, Pilgrim is filmed by a German correspondent in a staged reenactment of his capture.

The owl is heard by Billy in various time periods, and seems to come unstuck with him as he travels through different parts of his life. The German correspondent filming Billy's "capture" describes just how strange and difficult it can be to document the "reality" of war. Billy's capture was similar to this reenactment, but of course the reenactment itself is not "real." It's simply play-acting.

Billy is back in 1967, in his Cadillac. He is driving through Ilium, NY's "black ghetto," which reminds him of devastated cities he saw in the war. Parts of Ilium are to be "renewed" and developed, which Pilgrim finds acceptable. At the Lions Club meeting Pilgrim attends, a speaker argues that US involvement in North Vietnam is necessary. The North Vietnamese, the speaker argues, should be "bombed back into the Stone Age" if they will not surrender. Pilgrim does not see a reason to protest the Vietnam War.

Here the "traveling through time" is brought on by war: the American officer argues that North Vietnam should be bombed "back in time." Similarly, Vonnegut has inserted a comparison between cities ruined by war, like Dresden, and urban areas in the US ruined for other social and political reasons, and illustrative of the divisions that exist in American society.

On Pilgrim's office wall is 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." It helps him and his patients to "keep going" although Pilgrim is not happy with life. Pilgrim meets the speaker, an Army major, who says Pilgrim ought to be proud of his son's service as a soldier in Vietnam. Pilgrim says he is proud.

This prayer will also come unstuck in time and follow Billy. Although Billy is happy that his son is serving his country—and avoiding the problematic behavior the son exhibited in high school—it is clear that Vonnegut worries about the Vietnam War and believes it is a complex conflict with a high potential for needless violence.

Pilgrim goes home to nap. He has a large home and owns parts of various businesses in Ilium. He is "richer than Croesus." Pilgrim goes to his wife's bedroom and turns on the vibrating bed in order to sleep, but he can only cry softly to himself. The doorbell rings and Pilgrim looks outside: cripples are coming through the neighborhood to sell magazine subscriptions, a "business" which Pilgrim knows is a scam. He continues to weep and finds himself back in Luxembourg, in World War II.

The vibrating bed and Billy's crying also follow Billy throughout the various stages of his life. Billy's wealth provides all sorts of material comforts but, in the post-war years, cannot quite seem to displace whatever underlying anxiety or deep-rooted sadness that causes Billy to cry when he is alone.

Pilgrim sees "St. Elmo's Fire," a kind of radiant halo, around the heads of the Americans and Germans and finds it beautiful. As the Americans march eastward, German reserves march westward to continue the fight. One spits on Weary. They continue their march into Germany, and Pilgrim finds himself in a railroad car bound for a POW camp.

Billy's vision seems like something a "pilgrim" might experience while in the throes of an ecstatic religious experience. Although Vonnegut remarks throughout that Billy does tend to follow organized Christianity, it is clear that he thinks often of Jesus and, in his concern with time, fate, and death, returns again and again to religious questions.

A colonel dying of pneumonia asks Pilgrim if he was one of his men. Pilgrim is ignorant of military terminology and does not understand the question. The colonel, who calls himself Wild Bob, believes he is addressing his men, although no one among the POWs was in his unit except Weary, who is too preoccupied by the pain in his feet caused by the clogs to notice. Wild Bob says they will be reunited at his house in Cody, Wyoming. Vonnegut says that this happened, and that he and Bernard O'Hare were there to witness it.

Here is an instance of Vonnegut inserting himself directly into the story, "bearing witness" to the events that have taken place and lending them credibility. All along there is an implication that, whether or not Billy Pilgrim is real, the description of World War II are accurate. Here, to underscore this point, Vonnegut steps into the action of the novel to argue for the truth of the events he's depicting in his novel.

Pilgrim is placed into a train car with his fellow privates, Weary with soldiers of his own rank. An older hobo grouped with the privates says their treatment and situation in the boxcar is "not so bad." Pilgrim catches a glimpse of the luxury in the railcar for the German officers. Wild Bob dies in the colonel's car and his corpse is carried out. The trains are marked with orange and black banners, to signify they are filled with POWs and not to be bombed by the enemy.

The orange and black "do not bomb" pattern returns throughout Billy's life—it follows his travels through time. The hobo, who argues that their treatment is not so bad since he has experienced worse in peacetime, reminds the reader that, although war can be brutal, sometimes life itself is just as awful for some. In this way war is merely an extension of life, a natural outcome of humans' lives.

Pilgrim's train, the lowest in the hierarchy by rank, does not move for two days. "Water, and loaves of blackbread and sausage and cheese" are passed in to the car through ventilators, and "shit and piss and language" are passed out. Pilgrim dumps helmets full of human waste out the ventilator. He falls asleep on the floor of the car and is transported to 1967, the time of his abduction by the Tralfamadorians.

Billy is once again given an unfortunate position, because he is weak and does not look like a soldier. He is the communicator between the worlds inside and outside the railcar, just as he is a communicator between the alien world of Tralfamadore and earth many millions of miles away.

CHAPTER 4

Pilgrim has trouble sleeping the night of his daughter's wedding (which took place that day under an orange- and black-striped tent.) He gets out of bed, where his wife is sleeping, and, moving down the hallway, he understands that he is about to be abducted by aliens. Pilgrim stops in his daughter's room and answers the phone—a drunk has called the wrong number. He goes downstairs, knowing he has an hour till the abduction, and turns on the TV.

Vonnegut has mentioned drunkenly calling people he knew from the war in Chapter One—his own breath he describes as smelling like "mustard gas and roses." Here, it appears that Vonnegut has again inserted himself in the narrative, calling Pilgrim but then having nothing to say to him on the telephone.

A World War II movie is playing and is unstuck in time. The movie runs backward. Corpses and destroyed planes fly backward and are "stacked neatly," the bodies "made . . . good as new." Minerals used to make bombs are hidden in the ground, and humanity reverses so that all humans are babies, producing Adam and Eve. Billy thinks he hears an owl outside but it is the flying saucer from Tralfamadore.

The war film shown in reverse is an obvious manipulation of time that goes from destruction to peacefulness, rather than the other way around—the normal progression of warfare. This is another example of the manipulation of time, and it represents a wish on the part of the author, and Billy, to undo the suffering war has created.

The saucer is 100 feet in diameter. Pilgrim is sucked inside and greeted by a Tralfamadorian, who asks if he has any questions. Pilgrim asks why he was chosen and the Tralfamadorian responds that they are "trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*." Billy is fastened to a Barca-Lounger and anesthetized; the acceleration of the ship takes him back to the war.

This passage, " . . . *trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no* why," *is often repeated in discussions of the novel. The notion that events simply happen as they do, as they are fated to happen, reappears throughout the book. And just as an insect trapped in amber can be "unsealed" in a new time period, so can Billy be transported from one epoch or planet to another.*

In the railcar Pilgrim is trying to lie down and sleep. The car is moving slowly across Germany. No privates in the car wish to have Pilgrim next to them because he kicks in his sleep. On the ninth day of their travels the hobo, who thought their treatment was not "so bad," dies, as does Weary, of gangrene caused by his ill-fitting clogs. He bemoans the fate of the Three Musketeers and asks someone to avenge him—to kill Billy Pilgrim, whom Weary holds responsible for his injury and subsequent death. On the tenth day they reach the POW camp, originally built to exterminate Russian prisoners.

Both Weary and the hobo die on the same day, and their approaches to death are opposed. The hobo dies still believing that life in the railcar as a POW is not so bad as life as a hobo in peacetime. Weary, on the other hand, rages at his misfortune, at his bad luck, and seeks someone to blame. Thus he wishes that Billy pay the price for his own unlucky death.

Pilgrim is helped from the boxcar and he "flows" with the other prisoners toward the entrance gate. From a pile of clothing left behind by dead prisoners he is given a very small, frozen coat. He passes through a "de-lousing station" where he is asked to strip; Vonnegut remarks that this is the same protocol used when Pilgrim is abducted and taken to Tralfamadore. Walking near Pilgrim is Edgar Derby, a forty-four year old English teacher from Indianapolis, who held Weary's head as he died and who has a son fighting in the Pacific. Vonnegut announces that, in 68 days, Derby will be executed by firing squad.

This passage introduces Edgar Derby in more detail—a good man with a family, not unlike the man Billy will become, whose poor luck leads him to be executed, but who is in many respects the opposite of Weary. Derby wishes to help Billy and later looks after him in the POW camp's sick-room. Vonnegut's comparison of the de-lousing station in the POW camp to the Tralfamadorian abduction serves to link war and science fiction: in many ways, war is as "un-real" seeming as any sci-fi novel.

Paul Lazzaro, a skinny car thief from Illinois, is introduced. He was also in Weary's car and has pledged to kill Pilgrim to avenge Weary. All the Americans are showered and "de-loused." Billy comes unstuck in time and becomes a baby. Then he is playing golf, a middle-aged optometrist. He is back on Tralfamadore, "three hundred million miles from Earth."

Lazzaro survives the POWs' trip to the camp and pledges to avenge Weary's death by killing Pilgrim. This is then "fated"; Pilgrim himself later acknowledges that he will die because Lazzaro wishes for it to happen. By the point of his death in the 1970s, however, Billy has met with the Tralfamadorians and has a new understanding of "four-dimensional" time; thus he is at peace with his coming death.

The Tralfamadorian present says humans are "the great explainers," but Tralfamadorians see "all time as all time," like a "stretch of the Rocky Mountains." Pilgrim says the Tralfamadorian sounds like he doesn't believe in free will. The Tralfamadorian replies that free will is a concept created and used only by human beings on earth.

Again free will is tied to the notion of time-travel and four-dimensional time. If all moments of one's life can be seen at once, beginning to end, then everything is already determined. Tralfamadorians believe that this makes it easier to concentrate only on the good moments in one's life.

CHAPTER 5

Pilgrim asks for reading material on the trip to Tralfamadore and is given *Valley of the Dolls*. The Tralfamadorians give him several of their own planet's novels on his request, which Pilgrim cannot read. But he observes how they are formatted: "in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars." A Tralfamadorian explains that the books have "no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects." They are meant to be read "all at once."

An extremely important passage. Vonnegut has given, in some sense, a key to understanding Slaughterhouse-Five, a novel which attempts to show time without beginning, middle, or end, without linear direction, but rather time all at once. Thus Billy is hurled from one moment to another. Vonnegut has adapted this Tralfamadorian compositional method into English.

Pilgrim comes unstuck in time and is 12 years old, with his family by the Grand Canyon. He is terrified he will fall in. He is at Carlsbad Canyons in total darkness, and can see only his father's radium watch dial. He is back in the POW camp, in the war. His clothes are de-loused but still dirty. He puts on his very small overcoat and realizes that it is filled with bullet holes. The POWs march and are entered into a ledger by the Germans, so that they are legally prisoners and therefore "alive." An American "mutter[s] something which a guard did not like." The German guard knocks down the American. The American asks why he has been selected for this punishment; the German answers, "Vy not?"

This tiny coat is another small and poignant reminder of the horror of war. Whoever was wearing it was too tiny to fight back, and the bullet holes in the coat indicate that the wearer suffered a gruesome end. The German guard echoes the Tralfamadorian statement that "there is no why," no explanation for why events are the way they are. Yet the Tralfamadorians, in holding Billy captive, do not wish to harm him—rather, they wish to understand his way of life. The Germans here, in contrast, are interested only in controlling their prisoners.

Pilgrim, Lazzaro, Derby, and others are led to a shed filled with British POWs who have been in the camp since the start of the war. They are officers who have already attempted to escape from other camps. Over their four years of imprisonment they have sung songs and exercised; they are happy and boisterous. The Red Cross has shipped them vast quantities of food because of a "clerical error."

The Englishmen exist in a time outside the linear time of war. They have not fought since the beginning of the conflict and can only learn of its atrocities from other sources. They create instead a fantasy-land within the camp, complete with plays and banquets that enable them to forget the reason for their imprisonment and even the entire war.

The Englishmen have known of the Americans arrival 12 hours in advance, and have been cleaning and preparing the camp. The Englishmen have prepared a large banquet for them with milk, soup, beef, and other delicacies. Billy is so dazed by this scene that he does not realize the hem of his coat has caught fire. It is put out by an Englishman, who tells Pilgrim the coat was a joke played on him by the Germans. Pilgrim faints from weakness and awakes to the Englishmen performing a rendition of the play *Cinderella*.

The Englishman here wants Billy to know that his coat is a deliberate affront by the Germans, who consider Billy ridiculous in his irregular chaplain's assistant uniform. Billy is so enraptured, later, by the fiction of the Englishmen's play that he cannot keep himself from laughing—it is this joy, rather than the cruel conditions of the camp, that lands him in the sick-room.

Billy finds a part of the play so hilarious that he cannot stop laughing. He is carted into the camp's medical quarters, sedated, and put on bed rest. Derby watches over him and reads *The Red Badge of Courage*. Billy has a dream that he is a giraffe living with other giraffes. After coming unstuck in time, Billy awakes in a veteran's nonviolent mental hospital in 1948, where he has voluntarily checked in after his breakdown just before finishing optometry school. The doctors who admit him don't believe his breakdown has to do with war trauma, but rather with his father forcing him to swim and visit the Grand Canyon in his youth.

The Red Badge of Courage is an important American novel describing one young man's wavering between courage and cowardice during the American Civil War. Billy has not even been given a chance to demonstrate courage: he was captured by the Germans before he even understood the battle he was fighting, or where he was supposed to go. Vonnegut also appears to be making fun of psycho-therapy in this passage, which tends, at least in the popular conception, to lay blame for mental illness on one's relationships with one's family.

In the bed next to Billy is Eliot Rosewater, checked in for alcohol abuse. Rosewater introduces Billy to the science fiction writings of Kilgore Trout, an author of cheap paperbacks. Both Rosewater and Billy "found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war." Thus science fiction allows them to "re-invent themselves and their universe." Billy becomes an avid fan of Trout's work. Rosewater says *The Brothers Karamazov* contains everything one ought to know about life, but that the book "isn't *enough* anymore."

Another important passage. In introducing Trout, Vonnegut also introduces the idea of a science-fiction writer into the story, a person capable of creating new worlds and alternate realities with words. This, as Vonnegut describes, is very important both to Billy and to Rosewater, whose experiences in war have landed them in a mental institution. The Brothers Karamazov is not enough because the war has made Billy and Rosewater need more than just knowledge of human nature—human nature is what caused the war, after all. They don't want to know about the world; they want a different world.

When Billy's mother visits the ward, he hides his head under the blankets until she leaves. Rosewater speaks with her instead. Rosewater suggests that perhaps Billy, who is about to finish optometry school, is overworked. Rosewater is reading a Trout book entitled *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, which argues that mental diseases are not of the three visible dimensions and therefore difficult for human doctors to understand.

Another important passage. If mental disease is in fact caused by one's ability to see into another dimension, then Billy's condition might be explained by the encounter he is to have with the Tralfamadorians in the future, when he is told about Tralfamadorian ideas of fate and time. Trout, then, is "given credit" for inventing, in his own novel-within-the-novel, a plot device which Vonnegut applies to his own characters in Slaughterhouse-Five.

Billy comes unstuck and is back in the war. Derby is still reading to him and Billy sees Derby's execution in the near future. An English officer comes in to check on Billy. He tells Derby that, when the US prisoners shaved, he realized the war was "fought by babies"—"a Children's Crusade." Derby tells briefly of how he was captured after a period of intense German shelling.

When the English officer says that the Americans look like children when shaved, he is directly echoing Mary O'Hare's idea that wars are fought by children. Thus Vonnegut links, in his subtitle "The Children's Crusade," something a fictional character says to Billy with something a "real" character, Mary, says to him while writing the novel.

Billy's fiancée Valencia, the daughter of a wealthy optometrist, is visiting the mental ward in 1948. She offers him a Three Musketeers bar. Rosewater is reading about Tralfamadorian-like aliens who study Christianity on earth. The alien says the problem with Christianity is **Jesus**' power, and the alien then describes an alternate Gospel where Jesus is a "nobody" who is later *adopted* by God on the cross. This is designed to reinforce the message that it's not OK to hurt anyone, rather than the message of the original Gospels, which argue against hurting a "well-connected" person. Rosewater complains that Trout is a bad prose stylist; "only his ideas [are] good."

An important discussion of theology, or the philosophy underlying a set of religious beliefs. The argument in Trout's book is as follows: Jesus would be a more compelling figure if he were rescued by God not because Jesus is the son of God, but rather because Jesus is "a nobody," a person without connections, whom God saves simply because he loves all mankind. With this "tweak" to the Gospels, Trout believes Christianity would be more sensible and more helpful to those in need.

Rosewater compliments Valencia's diamond, which Billy took as booty in the war. Billy comes unstuck and is 44 years old, on display in a zoo on Tralfamadore. The natives are examining his naked body. His habitat has been set up with furniture taken from a Sears store in Iowa. The Tralfamadorians find Billy beautiful, as he exercises and eats, because they have seen no other humans. On Tralfamadore, Billy learns, there are five sexes, and on Earth there are seven, only these differences exist in the fourth dimension and cannot be seen by humans.

The Tralfamadorians observe Billy simply because they wish to know how he behaves. The notion that there are multiple sexes that are not visible echoes the idea, earlier, that mental illnesses might be caused by disturbances in the fourth dimension, and that time itself occupies a dimension unknown to many earthlings.

While Billy is on display in the zoo, a Tralfamadorian guide uses metaphors to explain to fellow aliens how Billy understands time. In one, Billy is strapped to a railcar and can only see through a small hole in a metal sphere. He does not know the railcar is moving, nor how fast. Billy later asks the Tralfamadorians how they have managed to live in a world without war. A Tralfamadorian answers that they know the Universe is destroyed "while [they are] experimenting with new fuels for flying saucers." This event has always happened and will happen, therefore it cannot be prevented. Thus Tralfamadorians focus only on pleasant moments.

Here, again, Vonnegut breaks down the Tralfamadorian system for understanding time and fate. For humans, time can exist only in one direction, but if the metaphor of the train holds, then our feeling of "linearity" is in fact subject to the nature of the track we're on—and if we learn about the track, we learn more about the nature of time. Similarly, knowing about war and destruction, and knowing it will always happen, is not paralyzing but liberating—it allows Tralfamadorians to enjoy the moment they are living, and to travel back and forth in time to enjoyable memories.

Billy comes unstuck and is making love to his wife on their wedding night. A green and orange boat, appearing orange and black in the night, glides outside their apartment. Valencia promises to lose weight for Billy—he sees their whole marriage, present and future, and realizes that things will be mostly tolerable. They lie together. Valencia says she feels Billy is "full of secrets." Billy imagines an epitaph that Vonnegut thinks also describes himself: "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt." Valencia asks Billy about Derby's execution.

The black and orange striped image returns, this time "coming unstuck" on Billy's wedding night. The statement, "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt" might describe those pleasant moments to which Billy can travel at any time—the moments that make life worth living. Valencia appears to recognize that Billy has experienced a great deal in the war, even if he is not really able to articulate his experience to her.

Billy comes unstuck and is in the POW hospital in 1944. Derby is asleep. Billy wanders outside, dancing, and becomes snagged on a fence, only to be freed by a Russian prisoner who is out at night to use the bathroom. Billy follows the sounds of crying toward the camp latrine. The rich food of the banquet has made many of the POWs ill. One man cries that he has passed everything except his brains, then passed his brains. Vonnegut steps in to say that that man is he, Vonnegut. Billy wanders back to Valencia and his wedding night.

Vonnegut once again inserts himself into the narrative. He knows exactly the joke the man in the latrine made because he himself was that man making the joke. It is another "near miss," an instance where Billy and Vonnegut almost meet, as in the telephone call to Billy on the night of his daughter's wedding, when Vonnegut sits silently on the other end of the line.

Back in the war, Lazzaro is carried into the sick-room; his arm was broken by an Englishmen when Lazzaro attempted to steal his cigarettes. A German officer comes in to talk to the Englishmen and reads from a book by an American, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who has become a propagandist for Nazi Germany. In this book, Campbell argues that Americans are mostly poor, uncouth, and terrible liars.

Howard Campbell, a fictional character, serves to confuse what is "right" and "wrong" in the Second World War, traditionally judged in the United States to be a war for democracy and against fascist dictatorships. Campbell believes that there is much to admire about the Germans and that Americans would do well to imitate the Germans and, eventually, turn the fight against the Russians.

Billy travels to 1968. His daughter Barbara is angry that he has been writing to newspapers about Tralfamadore. She turns the heat on, although Billy does not notice he has been cold. He travels to Tralfamadore, where he has been given a companion in the zoo, a Hollywood star named Montana Wildhack. Billy is kind to Montana, and they begin having a romantic relationship. Billy is back in 1968 in Ilium. He decides to return to work, where he tells a boy, whose father was recently killed in Vietnam, that his father would always remain alive. The boy's mother complains, and Barbara worries about Billy once more.

Billy's relationship with Montana, although it is initiated by the Tralfamadorians, becomes a very real and caring one, which later leads to a child cared for by both while on Tralfamadore (time there is different from time on earth; although Billy's abduction is short in earth-years, it is long in Tralfamadore-years). Billy's advice, given to a young patient, is well-intentioned but is quite shocking to the child's mother, who is not accustomed to Tralfamadorian ideas of time.

CHAPTER 6

Billy wakes from his morphine slumber in the POW camp. He feels an "animal magnetism" behind him and thinks it's a bat; it turns out to be the old, small coat from before, in which Billy finds two small lumps, one like a horseshoe, one like a pea. The Englishman who injured Lazzaro comes to see how Lazzaro is doing. Lazzaro curses him and tells a story of how he killed a dog who bit him by grinding up bits of a clock spring and putting it in the dog's meat. Lazzaro, later, does not appreciate the firebombing of Dresden, however, because he only exacts revenge on those who "have had it coming."

Lazzaro's gruesome stories of revenge nevertheless have a code of their own: Lazzaro believes he must kill only those responsible for wronging him. The bombing in Dresden, on the other hand, will take the lives of innocent civilians, who never "did anything" to the Allies in the first place; this means they are not a legitimate military target. In this way Lazzaro's views on Dresden appear more ethical than the US Army's.

Lazzaro says that, one day, he will have the Englishman who injured him shot. He also promises that, as Weary requested, he will have Billy shot after the war as well. Because Billy can travel in time, he knows this is in fact how he will die. He records a message saying he will die on February 13th, 1976, when the US has been heavily damaged by another large war. Just before his death he is in Chicago, giving a speech to a large crowd about Tralfamadore and time. He announces to the crowd that he will be shot soon. He is killed by a laser gun and experiences death as "a violet light and a hum."

A peak into the future. At this point Billy has become a national success-story, a speaker on the nature of time and death. In fulfillment of his own teachings, Billy announces that his death is simply a part of his life, and the "violent light and hum" are all that are perceptible of what is supposed to be a horrific event.

Billy, Lazzaro, and Derby go to the theater in the camp, where an election is to be held among the American prisoners to choose a leader. Billy, before falling asleep on the floor, sees a pair of silver Cinderella boots left over from the performance; he takes them and they fit. An Englishman tells the POWs that they are being sent to Dresden, a city without "war industries" and therefore not a target for bombing, and a beautiful cultural center. Derby is elected leader of POWs although most Americans are sleeping or uninterested. They are taken to railcars bound for Dresden. Billy comes upon the hobo, still dead. Someone has taken the hobo's boots.

Another instance of irony in the novel: Dresden was considered "off-limits" for bombings because it did not produce material necessary for war. This makes the Allies' bombing of the city far more difficult to justify: it appears to have been done simply to demoralize the Germans by destroying a very beautiful city. Derby is elected leader of the American contingent but his position carries no power—indeed, it does nothing to save him from his ultimate fate, death by firing squad.

Billy and the Americans arrive in Dresden. Someone remarks that the city resembles Oz. This man is Vonnegut, who again says "that was me." Eight Germans come to pick up the Americans, and finding Billy in his strange blue Cinderella costume and Lazzaro with his broken arm, they are reassured by the Americans' weakness and disarray. Billy and the others march through the city and marvel at its beauty. Billy, because he can travel through time, knows the city will be destroyed in a month, but he enjoys his walk regardless. A German surgeon asks Billy, angrily, if he likes dressing up and making mockery of war. Billy pulls the two small bits out of his coat: a diamond and a piece of denture. The Americans are taken to their "home": the fifth building of the Dresden *Schlachthof-funf*: **Slaughterhouse**-Five.

Vonnegut again inserts himself into the narrative, saying that he was the one to link Dresden and Oz, two magical, beautiful cities. This passage also introduces the actual Slaughterhouse-Five, which will become the POWs' home for only a short while, and which embodies an irony central to the book: the slaughterhouse where animals are killed is exactly the place where the Americans are spared from the slaughter taking place all around them.

CHAPTER 7

Twenty-five years later, Billy is boarding the plane to the optometrists' convention in Montreal, knowing it will crash. His father-in-law is beside him and Valencia is outside, waving goodbye, eating a Mound Bar. Billy knows the plane is going to crash but does not wish to say anything and "make of fool of himself."

Although Billy knows what the immediate future will bring, he does not wish to disturb the present—or appear suspiciously knowing—by announcing that the plane will crash before it does. He allows time, and fate, to play out on its own.

A **barbershop quartet** on the plane begins to sing for everyone's amusement. They sing Polish songs and Billy recalls a Pole he saw hanging in Dresden, executed for sleeping with a German woman. The plane crashes into Sugarbush Mountain in Vermont; only Billy and the copilot make it out alive. Two Austrian ski instructors find Billy, who has been gravely wounded, and he says to them his "address": Schlachthof-fünf.

The barbershop quartet will appear later in the text as a trigger for one of Billy's memories about the war. Because Billy's rescuers are Austrians—and perhaps because, in his state of duress, Billy is reminded of warfare—he longs for the safety of Slaughterhouse-Five, which unfortunately no longer can protect him.

Billy is taken to a hospital; his brain injury is operated on by a famous surgeon and he dreams "millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel." Back in 1944, a very young German soldier named Werner Gluck is leading Billy and Derby to the **slaughterhouse** kitchen. They stumble upon a group of 30-some young girls showering—Billy and Werner have never seen naked women before. An old woman, preparing their dinner later, sees Derby, Werner, and Billy—one old, one young, one dressed for Cinderella, and says "all the real soldiers are dead."

Another illustration of Billy's youthfulness: he has never seen a naked woman. These young girls, Billy later realizes, must have been killed in the firebombing. Billy still is not believed to be a "real soldier"—he is dressed in his Cinderella costume. Yet Billy has experienced a great deal as a POW, and despite his weakness, he makes it out of the war alive.

One of Billy's jobs in Dresden is to seal boxes in a malt syrup factory. Billy takes some syrup, finds it rapturously delicious, and gives to Derby, who is so happy to eat it he cries.

This is one of the "pleasant moments" the Tralfamadorians emphasize in their philosophy of time. The horrors of war make this moment even more ecstatically wonderful.

CHAPTER 8

Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who wrote the anti-American book read by the Germans in the POW camp, visits Billy's group in **Slaughterhouse**-Five two days before the bombing of Dresden. He wishes to recruit Americans to fight with Germany against the Russians and wears his own uniform, with a red-white-blue swastika armband. The Americans are tired from eating so much syrup and barely listen to Campbell. As Campbell speaks, however, Derby rises, and Vonnegut interjects that, although the story has had few dramatic moments up till this point, this was a genuine dramatic moment. Derby gives a stirring speech about American ideal of freedom, and the desire to defeat the Nazis. He is interrupted by an air-raid siren.

Vonnegut admits that his novel, though discussing a very "dramatic" event, the firebombing of Dresden, is nevertheless mostly devoid of dramatic events. Derby's confrontation with Campbell, however, does represent a clash of ideals: Derby's, of liberty and the American way, and Campbell's, of pragmatism and recognition that the Nazi cause might have some things in common with the American. Just as Derby has made his speech, however, the air-raid comes—and the American bombing of Dresden begins, an event that takes many civilian lives and doesn't seem particularly "democratic" or "liberal."

The Americans, their guards, and Campbell go to a meat locker beneath the **slaughterhouse**. The first night nothing happens, but the second night the bombing takes place and 130,000 Dresdners are killed. Billy sleeps and thinks about Kilgore Trout, whom his daughter says she would like to kill, since he has planted strange ideas about aliens in Billy's head. Trout lives in Ilium, has written 75 novels, and works as a circulation manager for the *Ilium Gazette*, which means managing paper delivery boys.

The firebombing is not dramatized by Vonnegut: it is reported in only a few sentences. Immediately Vonnegut pivots to a discussion of Billy's interaction with Kilgore Trout, who, it turns out, lives in Billy's hometown and works a menial job, as befits someone who has sold very few books and has only two stated fans, Billy and Rosewater.

Billy first meets Trout when Trout is corralling his group of delivery boys (and one girl). Trout promises a trip to Martha's Vineyard to whomever sells the most Sunday subscriptions. A boy quits and Trout calls him a "gutless wonder." This is also the title of a book Trout wrote, in the 1930s, which, among other things, predicts the use of napalm in war.

This reference to napalm shows Vonnegut's continued concern with the ethical questions of the conflict not just in WWII but also in Vietnam, which raged as he wrote the novel in 1967 and 1968. Napalm was a chemical used to firebomb and destroy the jungles and villages where Vietcong (and innocent Vietnamese villagers) were hiding. Trout has once again predicted in his writings an aspect of the future.

Billy helps Trout deliver the papers of the boy who quits. Trout admits that he has only received one fan letter, from Eliot Rosewater, who Trout thought to be a teenager. Billy invites Trout to his 18th wedding anniversary. At the anniversary party, Trout talks to Maggie White, a young woman who does not read much, and tells her that he must tell the truth in his books, and that everything in his life he puts into his writing. He tells Maggie that God knows all the good and bad things she thinks and says, and will use that information on Judgment Day. Maggie grows scared and leaves.

Trout is out of place at Billy's party, although many there do not know that he is unsuccessful and care only that he is a writer. Trout's admonition to Maggie is quite shocking and orthodoxly religious: he says that men and women will be judged in the afterlife for their actions on earth. Of course Trout does not necessarily believe what he is saying, but he plays on the naiveté of his listener.

A **barbershop quartet** (same as on the plane, later) sings "That Old Gang of Mine" to Valencia and Billy. Billy becomes sickened by the song and doesn't understand why; he feels there is some "big secret" inside him of which he is unaware. Trout believes that Billy has seen through a "time window" but Billy denies this. Billy gives Valencia jewelry for their anniversary.

The barbershop quartet returns. Billy knows that this group triggers him emotionally, but he cannot quite place their meaning in his life. Trout understands that Billy is affected and appears, further, to comprehend Billy's ability to see back and forth in time.

Trout follows Billy around the party and compares Billy's expression to that of a dog standing on a mirror—total fear and confusion. Billy flees upstairs. In his room he remembers—he does not "come unstuck"—the booming sounds above the **slaughterhouse** during the bombing, and the fact that everyone above was being killed. Everything in the city was on fire. The German guards drew together, standing, and resembled the **barbershop quartet** singing downstairs at the party.

One of the most dramatic and important scenes in the novel. Billy makes a connection not through time-travel but through memory—the mental faculty that Vonnegut claims is of little use to himself in writing the novel, as Vonnegut cannot remember many experiences from the war. Billy understands that a lot of his grief derives from the shock of being spared in the slaughterhouse during the bombing when so many others weren't. He grieves even for the German guards.

Billy and Montana Wildhack are lying in bed in the Tralfamadorian zoo. Montana asks Billy to tell her a story, and he tells of Dresden, the firebombing, and the guards who resemble a **barbershop quartet**, the surface of the city like a moon. After the firebombing, guards ordered the Americans to climb over the city's rubble. An American plane flies over and strafes the POWs with machine-gun fire. Finally the Americans reach a Dresden suburb, where a German couple keeps open their inn. They take in the 100 POWs and four guards and bid the Americans a good night's sleep.

Billy then relates this connection to Montana on Tralfamadore, who becomes a kind of second wife with whom he can communicate quite deeply. The German couple who welcome the POWs are a poignant example of the humanity of those considered to be the "enemy" of the Americans—they have stayed open despite their nearly certain knowledge that most in Dresden have perished in the bombing.

CHAPTER 9

The chapter begins with the story of Valencia's death. After hearing that Billy was in a plane crash in Vermont, Valencia drives the family Cadillac and, because she is distraught, makes an incorrect turn, slows down, and is hit by a Mercedes, damaging the car's exhaust system. Valencia continues driving despite the accident and pull into the hospital parking lot, only to pass out, blue in the face, and die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Billy "causes" Valencia's death just as he has "caused" Weary's. This is another instance of immensely cruel fate, and of the violence that seems to follow Billy but never quite manages to kill him—until his death, ordered by Lazzaro, in the 1970s.

Meanwhile, Billy is in a hospital room in Vermont with a Harvard professor named Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, who has broken a leg skiing. Rumfoord's fifth wife, Lily, who is twenty-three (Rumfoord is 70), brings him books to read. Lily is scared of Billy, who talks in his sleep, and Rumfoord finds him boring. Rumfoord is the official Air Force Historian and a retired brigadier general.

Rumfoord is in many ways the opposite of Billy—a distinguished academic with a long record of service in the armed forces. But he was not present at the firebombing of Dresden and Billy ways—making Billy's experience of war, in some sense, more direct and authentic.

Lily has brought Rumfoord a Xerox of President Truman's speech to the Japanese shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima—this is for Rumfoord's research. Lily reads the document, which describes the atomic bomb, a brief history of its development, and the military and moral justification for its use in war. Lily has also brought a book called *The Destruction of Dresden*. One foreword to the book calls the bombing of that city a military necessity, and another claims that advocates of nuclear disarmament must take bombings like Dresden into account, conducted as they were with conventional weapons. Billy continues to mumble in his sleep.

Vonnegut uses Lily's visit as an excuse to enter a few found documents into the text. The first is Truman's justification of the use of the atomic bomb over Japan: he argued that, although many Japanese civilians were killed, far more would have been killed in a conventional ground attack on the Japanese islands. The Dresden book presents various arguments for and against the bombing and its military usefulness.

Barbara, having just learned that her mother is dead and her father gravely wounded, visits Billy, who is time-traveling: to 1958, prescribing lenses; to age 16, in a doctor's waiting room with a man afflicted by awful gas. Billy briefly sees his son in Vermont and misses his wife's funeral. Rumfoord tells Lily that he needs information about Dresden for his new one-volume history of the air war in World War II—none was included in previous multi-volume editions. Billy speaks, finally, saying: "I was there."

Rumfoord is attempting to write a history of Dresden just as Vonnegut is trying to write a personal history of the bombings. What Rumfoord does not know, however, is that Billy, who has experienced the bombing firsthand, lies next to him. Indeed Rumfoord refuses to accept that Billy is telling the truth when he says he was present; eventually Rumfoord is convinced, but he still treats Billy as though he is unimportant.

Rumfoord believes Billy is merely repeating what Rumfoord had been saying earlier; he does not believe Billy was in Dresden. Rumfoord believes Billy is weak, and that "weak people deserve to die." Billy comes unstuck and is back outside Dresden, two days after the end of the war in Europe, May 1945. He and other Americans are in a wagon pulled by horses. They are using the wagon to collect material amid the rubble of the city. Sitting in the back of the wagon, dozing under the sun, becomes one of Billy's happiest memories. A German couple speaks softly to the horses, which have been ill-treated by their American drivers, and curse Billy for this. When Billy looks at the broken-down horses, he cries.

An important passage in the novel. Billy believes that this scene, of dozing in the sun, is one of his most pleasant memories, one to which he will return again and again over the course of his later travels through time. This supports that idea that, even in the face of terrible tragedy and destruction, it is possible to find some beauty and goodness—however fleeting.

Vonnegut explains that the book's epigraph, from a Christmas carol, describes Billy's silent crying in later life: "The cattle are lowing / The Baby awakes. / But the little Lord **Jesus** / No crying He makes." Billy is back in Vermont, telling the story of the horses to Rumfoord. Rumfoord argues that Dresden was militarily necessary. Billy said it was all right, that "everything is all right," and that he learned this from the Tralfamadorians.

Another reference to Jesus. Billy's crying, though frequent, is not perceptible by those around him. Finally, when Rumfoord argues that Dresden was necessary for the Americans to win the war, Billy agrees. His statement, "Everything is all right," echoes the previous statement "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt."

Barbara takes Billy home, where a nurse can take care of him, but Billy sneaks off to a hotel in New York. He is looking for a news program on which he can speak about his experiences with the Tralfamadorians. Billy goes into an adult bookstore because he sees four Trout novels in the front window. He reads the beginning of a book called *The Big Board*, about a man and woman captured by aliens and put in a zoo on Zircon-212.

Another instance of the events in a Trout novel coming to pass in the "reality" of Billy's life: two humans are captured by aliens and placed in a zoo on a faraway planet. Billy is not interested in the other, adult material in the bookstore, only in the books the proprietors consider props to disguise the store's true purpose.

He realizes he read this book in the veterans' hospital after the war. The plot of the book is as follows: On the "big board" in the human zoo is information about the humans' "investments," which have been simulated by the aliens. The humans are instructed to make as much money as they can while the aliens observe their behavior. In another of the Trout novels, a man builds a time machine and travels back to meet a twelve-year-old **Jesus**. Jesus was instructed by Roman soldiers to build a device for killing a "rabble-rouser."

The Trout book dealing with Jesus is of great importance in the novel. Jesus is portrayed as the son of a carpenter, learning the trade himself. But ironically he is asked to develop the machine that will eventually be used to kill him. It is Jesus' fate to die for humanity's sake, and he knows this all along, yet he willingly participates in the creation of the implement of his own demise.

A clerk comes up to Billy and tells him that adult materials are in the back of the shop. Billy continues reading the Trout book about **Jesus** and the time-machine; at the end, Jesus is killed, and the man checks Jesus' pulse, determining that he has in fact died on the cross. When Jesus is taken off the cross the man measures him; he is five feet, three and one-half inches tall. At checkout, buying the book about Jesus, he sees a magazine asking, "What really became of Montana Wildhack?"

Jesus was, in this telling, quite small and seemingly frail—not a majestic or imposing figure. Again, Jesus is introduced as a figure of pity and as a double for Billy: a man who travels between heaven and earth, and who is powerless (and does not try) to stop the fate that has been imposed upon him.

Billy knows what actually happened to Montana: she was on Tralfamadore with him. He walks to the back and looks into a picture-machine showing Montana eating a banana. Then another clerk shows him a suggestive picture of a woman and a pony.

The lewd pony picture has come "unstuck" and has followed Billy into the 1960s. Only Billy knows that Montana was on Tralfamadore with him, where they raise a child together. Though the novel never makes clear whether the Tralfamadore episodes are real or figments of Billy's imagination, and in not making this clear the novel suggests that it doesn't matter.

Billy finds his way into a radio show in progress, its topic: the future of the novel. Billy gets into the show by saying he is a literary critic for the *Ilium Gazette*. Various critics offer their opinions of novels, mostly agreeing that they aren't very socially useful. Billy is then called on, and he tells of his experiences on Tralfamadore. He is asked to leave at the commercial break.

The critics' opinions of novels presented in the round-table radio discussion are included for comedic effect. Vonnegut believes that his novel is useful for trying to explain what happened in Dresden, even if that story is disjointed, full of false starts and blind alleys.

Billy is back on Tralfamadore with Montana, who says she knows he has been time-traveling. She also knows that he was a "clown" in the war and that Derby was shot. Montana is nursing her and Billy's child, and between her bare breasts is a silver locket, on which is engraved: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . . ."

Montana understands the way that Billy can move through time. She wears on her neck that same prayer found in Billy's office, which can be read as a desire to come to terms with life's ups and downs—quite similar to the Tralfamadorian philosophy.

CHAPTER 10

Vonnegut opens the last chapter by saying that Robert Kennedy was shot two nights ago (in 1968) and Martin Luther King was shot one month ago. The Vietnam War is still raging. Vonnegut does not use the guns his father left him in his will. On Tralfamadore, Billy says the aliens care more about Darwin than Christ, since Darwin taught the necessity of death in life's procession.

Vonnegut brings the story back to the present and points to instance of violence current in the United States. Vonnegut against references Jesus and implies that Jesus is of more use to humans than to the Tralfamadorians, who prefer Darwin's science of the interaction of life and death.

Vonnegut says that, if Billy's ideas about time are true, he is happy that he has some nice moments to go back to, like his visit to East Germany with his friend Bernard O'Hare. Vonnegut remarks that he and his friend are now "well-to-do," and repeats, "If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob."

Vonnegut again references the material comfort he has achieved in his post-war years. At the time of the novel's writing, he had just begun to be acknowledged for his literary abilities.

O'Hare reads something in his notebook which states that 7 billion people will live on earth in the year 2000. Vonnegut says he supposes all those people "will want dignity." Pilgrim is back in 1945, being marched into Dresden's rubble, and Vonnegut says again that he, Vonnegut, was there also. They have "picks and shovels" and are to dig for bodies.

Vonnegut begins the final scene of the novel, a deeply moving portrait of the disposal of bodies following the destruction of Dresden. He, O'Hare, and Billy are all present at this event, which blends the novel's fact and fiction.

Billy and a Maori prisoner dig and find numerous bodies; the hole is widened and a "corpse mine" is created, the first of many. The mines begin to stink of "mustard gas and roses." The Maori dies of the dry heaves because of the stench. The POWs begin using flamethrowers to incinerate the corpses and prevent the smell. One of the corpses burnt is Derby's; he was buried there after his execution.

Derby returns, a symbol of the cruelty of fate and the apparent indifference of war to one's goodness or badness—some good soldiers are killed, and some bad soldiers are spared. "Mustard gas and roses" has come unstuck in time and entered its way into this scene in 1945. It is a scent that Vonnegut carries with him always, a memory he can never escape.

Later the Germans are called away to fight the Russians, the corpse mines are closed, and the end of the war is announced. Billy walks out onto a street and sees the horse-cart and horses he will use to rummage for supplies. "Birds were talking," writes Vonnegut, and "one bird said to Billy Pilgrim, '*Poo-tee-weet?*"

After the corpse-disposal scene, one of the novel's most gruesome, we now understand that Billy enters the horse-cart and proceeds to have one of the happiest days of his life. The birds above sing regardless, not concerned about Billy's plight, whether good or bad. They are an indicator of the indifference of nature to man's fate—a symbol of there being "no why."

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