

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

Book Information

Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five
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Book Level: 6.0
Interest Level: UG

From the World War Two firebombing of Dresden to the distant planet called Tralfamadore, the reader follows Billy Pilgrim in his attempt to understand the natures of time and existence.

Topics: Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Humor/Funny, Funny; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Barbara Pilgrim Billy's protective daughter

Billy Pilgrim a man who claims to have the ability to move backwards and forwards in time to eternally re-experience his family life, war experiences, alien abduction, and death

Edgar Derby a soldier who is shot for taking a teapot

Eliot Rosewater Billy's friend at the veterans' hospital who introduces him to Kilgore Trout's books

Howard Campbell an American who sympathizes with the Germans during the war

Kilgore Trout the science fiction writer whom Billy admires

Montana Wildhack an actress who is abducted by Tralfamadoreans to mate with Billy at the zoo

Paul Lazzaro the man who vows to avenge Roland Weary's death by killing Billy

Professor Rumfoord the man who writes the history of Dresden

Roland Weary the man who blames Billy for his capture during the war

Valencia Pilgrim Billy's wife who dies from carbon monoxide poisoning

Vocabulary

ambiguous not clear; vague

androgyny a person who is somewhat male and female in appearance

magnanimity rising above pettiness

vertigo a sensation of dizziness

Synopsis

Billy Pilgrim has a different understanding of life than most people. He considers himself "spastic in time" and claims the ability to relive any given moment of his existence, from birth to death. Billy's story is not a chronology, but a puzzle of events that are as "spastic" as the protagonist is himself.

Billy Pilgrim is born in 1922 in Ilium, New York. At a young age, Billy's father throws him into a Y.M.C.A. pool so he will learn to "sink or swim." This experience horrifies young Billy, and doctors later believe this event to be the start of Billy's mental problems.

Billy is later drafted into World War Two and serves as a chaplain's assistant. Billy is weak willed and helpless and, after returning from an emergency furlough caused by his father's death, Billy becomes a dazed wanderer behind German lines. Billy meets another unpopular survivor, Roland Weary, and two scouts who are attempting to travel to safety. The two scouts eventually abandon Billy and Weary, who are captured by the Germans. Weary spitefully blames Billy for their misfortune and dies on the way to the prison camp. Another prisoner, Paul Lazzaro, had comforted Weary on his deathbed and vows to avenge him by someday murdering Billy Pilgrim.

Billy and the other American prisoners are housed with British prisoners at one prison camp, but then are transported to the city of Dresden to work in a vitamin syrup factory. After an American who works as a Nazi sympathizer tries to recruit the prisoners to fight for Germany, the city of Dresden is

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completely destroyed by American firebombing. Billy survives the attack by hiding in a meat cooler. Billy and the others work to dig corpses out of the buried city, and eventually he is able to return home.

After Billy returns home, he attends optometry school and spends some time in a veterans' hospital. It is here that he is introduced to the novels of a science fiction writer named Kilgore Trout, which have a great influence on Billy's consciousness.

Billy marries an unattractive woman, Valencia, for her wealth and has two children. With the help of Valencia's father's money, he sets up a successful optometry practice. Then Billy's life changes drastically after fracturing his skull in an airplane crash. Valencia, frantically worried about Billy, gets into a car accident on her way to the hospital and then dies of carbon monoxide poisoning before she can reach him.

When Billy regains his health, he decides to tell the world, via radio talk shows, about being abducted by aliens on the night of his daughter's wedding. He says that he was put in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore and asked to mate with the American actress Montana Wildhack. The Tralfamadoreans teach Billy that time simply "is." Everything that will happen has already happened, and there is nothing that can be done to change it. He learns how he will die, how the universe will end, and how a person can be "unstuck" in time and travel from one moment of existence to another. Billy predicts he will die at the hands of Paul Lazzaro on February thirteenth, 1976, and locks this information inside a safe-deposit box to prove his story. As Billy's daughter tries desperately to keep him out of trouble, Billy insists he cannot help what has always been, will always be, and simply "is."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Roland Weary is very annoyed with Billy Pilgrim. Why is Weary so upset with Billy?

When Weary and the two scouts pick up Billy, Billy often refuses to continue to travel with them. He would rather give up. Weary, a man whose lifestyle includes finding weaker people and beating them, is disgusted by Billy. When the two scouts decide to leave Weary and Billy, Weary blames Billy for their departure. In his past, Weary has always been "ditched" by more popular people. After the scouts leave, Weary blames every negative thing that happens on Billy.

Literary Analysis

Throughout the novel, the narrator describes the barking of dogs. Why do you think the author includes this repetition?

To some students, the barking of dogs may not be significant. This barking may just be a part of Vonnegut's description of the scene. However, some students may interpret the dog barking as a warning or indication that something important is going to happen. One example occurs after Barbara's wedding. Billy, aware that a Tralfamadorian spacecraft will soon pick him up, goes out into his yard and, just before the spacecraft appears, a dog barks. Another example of this warning occurs just before Billy meets Kilgore Trout.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Billy affected by Kilgore Trout and his novels?

Billy Pilgrim seems to identify with Trout. Perhaps he sees Trout as a fellow "dreamer" or wanderer in time. Trout's novels are science fiction, and perhaps they allow Billy a way to validate his experiences on Tralfamadore. In chapter eight, Billy describes Trout as looking like a "prisoner of war." Maybe his appearance is part of the reason Billy is able to approach and befriend Trout. It is also possible that Trout's personality and smug confidence help Billy gain the confidence to try to explain his experiences on Tralfamadore to the world.

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Constructing Meaning

In most novels, the reader can identify and empathize with the protagonist. During your reading of this novel, did you identify and empathize with Billy Pilgrim? Why or why not?

The answers to this question will vary. Some students will empathize with Billy because many people "root for the underdog." Throughout most of the novel, Billy is a man with few friends and little self-esteem. Some readers may be able to relate to Billy's loneliness and suffering. Other readers may be completely annoyed with Billy throughout most of the novel because he is self-pitying and weak, two characteristics that may be unattractive to many readers.

write a short response on how the movie is different from or similar to their own interpretation of the novel.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization In many of Kurt Vonnegut's novels, the same characters appear. Have your students read one of the following novels and write a response on how the characters have progressed: *Mother Night*, *Breakfast of Champions*, or *Sirens of Titan*.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In this novel, Billy becomes an exhibit at a Tralfamadorian zoo. Have your students make a list of the items they feel would be important to include in a human-being exhibit in an extraterrestrial zoo. Then, in small groups, ask your students to create their own exhibit using props. Next, have the groups present their exhibits to the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft Vonnegut alludes to other books in this novel, such as *Valley of the Dolls* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. Ask your students to read or overview one of the books discussed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and discuss its relevance to *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the rest of the class.

Responding to Literature Show selected scenes from the movie *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972 Universal Pictures; rated R) to your students once they have finished the novel. Then ask them to