



Kurt Vonnegut

Slaughterhouse- Five

Some Teaching Tips

by Edward A. Newton

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A word of warning

Since this book deals with the themes of war and post-traumatic stress disorder, caution is advised should any of your pupils have themselves had traumatic experiences such as the witnessing of or involvement in a serious accident or an unexpected death in the family. Also one should not forget that very often pupils whose parents have fled persecution or war could react very differently to the events described in the novel from those pupils who have lived in Germany all their lives.

A. Introduction to the novel

Eight possible ways to get started

Because *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not have a chronological structure, it could prove to be rather confusing to pupils. There are, however, a number of ways in which the text could be introduced to a class.

1

The classical way would be to read the first chapter. However, even here the narrator not only moves back and forth in time but also comments on what he has written stating at the end of the first chapter what the beginning and the ending of the novel will be. If one uses this introduction it is important to make the pupils aware of certain themes: war and the drastic effects it can have on soldiers who survive; the young age of most soldiers; the bombing of Dresden and the fact that the author personally witnessed this event.

2

A second way to introduce the novel would be to read the second chapter as it contains the story in a nutshell in the first ten sections. The story then goes back to 1944 and the next two sections are about Billy's army training; in sections 13 to 19 Billy is wandering behind enemy lines with Weary and the two scouts. From section 20 to 33 the events are in jumbled-up form forcing the reader to try and work out when something happens. To help pupils you could ask them to write a chronological list of events in the chapter or give them one.

Chronological events in chapter two

There are 31 sections in the second chapter. The first ten sections are in chronological order, but the remaining sections go back and forth in time. Some sections even refer to two distinct periods as Billy travels in time.

23. First photograph made in 1839 by Louis J. M. Daguerre. In 1841 his assistant André Le Fèvre was arrested for trying to sell a pornographic picture and sentenced to six months in prison, where he died. (In section 22 Weary makes Billy look at this photograph).
1. Introduction; Billy is unstuck in time. He can see his birth and death. (cf. section 25)
2. From his birth (1922) to his nervous breakdown (1948).
25. A terrified Billy is thrown by his father into the deep end of a swimming pool although he cannot swim. He resents being saved. (He remembers this in 1944.)
20. In the 1930s Billy's mother works as an organist and on a trip buys him a crucifix.
12. While on training maneuvers he has a Tralfamadorian experience of being dead and alive at the same time. His father dies in a hunting accident.
13. He is sent to Europe. During the Battle of the Bulge he is trapped behind enemy lines.
He joins two scouts and an antitank gunner, Ronald Weary.
14. On the third day of wandering they are shot at.
15. Weary uses force to save Billy who just wants to be left alone.
16. It becomes clear that Weary is just as inexperienced as Billy.

17. The story of Weary's life of frustration is told as well as his love of torture instruments and weapons.
18. Weary talks further to Billy about his fascination with torture and violence.
19. Weary thinks Billy is ignorant about blood and gore but he isn't. Billy remembers the the crucifix his mother gave him which was hung on the wall of his room.
21. The four soldiers try to flee after being shot at but leave trails in the snow.
22. A description of Weary's equipment. He makes Billy admire a pornographic picture (described in section 23).
24. Weary imagines himself to be a hero; his Three Musketeers phantasy
11. 1944 is the first occasion when Billy becomes unstuck in time. He is a chaplain's assistant in the U.S. Army.
25. Billy's first experience of being unstuck in time. He is transported to a time before and after his birth and his death.
31. Weary shakes Billy awake. He wants the other three to go on without him. Weary forces him to come with them. They hear German soldiers and a big dog. Billy starts hallucinating, thinking that if left alone he will turn to steam and rise into the air. He imagines he has warm socks on and is dancing on a ballroom floor to great applause. The two scouts leave Billy and Weary.
32. Billy's hallucinations give way to time travel and he goes back to 1957 before returning to 1944 where Weary is about to beat him badly.
33. Weary feels he has been dumped again and starts shaking and hitting Billy who laughs. This makes him so angry that he wants to break Billy's back when suddenly he notices five German soldiers and a police dog. They are curious why one American is trying to murder another one who is laughing.
2. Billy's nervous breakdown in 1948.
3. After treatment in a veterans' hospital he marries Valencia Merble and is set up in the optometry business by his father-in-law.
4. Billy earns a lot of money and has two children. Barbara, his daughter, marries an optometrist (1967) and Robert becomes a Green Beret and fights in Vietnam. Billy is badly injured in a plane crash and his wife dies accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning.
32. It is 1957 Billy has just been elected president of the Lion's Club and delivers a well-received speech.
28. Billy is at a banquet for his son's Little League baseball team in 1958. The coach becomes very emotional.
29. At a New Year's Eve party in 1961 Billy becomes really drunk, explains that he is called Billy for business reasons and commits adultery for the first and only time in his life.
30. Still completely drunk he sits in the back of a car unable to find the steering wheel.
26. It's 1965 and Billy is 41. He sits by his mother in an old people's home.
27. He goes to a waiting room and sits down discovering a book about the only soldier shot for cowardice since the Civil War.
5. Billy recovers. He then goes to New York and talks on a radio programme about being taken to Tralfamadore. He is displayed naked in a zoo and mated with Montana Wildhack.
6. His daughter is very upset when she learns he is in New York and brings him back. A month later Billy writes a letter describing the Tralfamadorians to his local newspaper.

7. He is writing a second letter about the Tralfamadorian idea that every moment is eternal.
8. His daughter arrives but Billy does not open the door and she thinks he is dead. The heating does not function but Billy is enthusiastically writing his second letter. He now has a mission to tell the truth about time.
9. Barbara, now in the house, is very angry and thinks her father is senile. He wants to teach humans about Tralfamadorian wisdom.
10. Barbara continues to scold her father. She wants to know why he has never talked about the Tralfamadorians before.

3

A third and rather unusual introduction would be to read the tenth and final chapter first. This would emphasize that the beginning is also the end of the novel and vice versa. Here one would have to introduce and discuss various themes: the Vietnam War and the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; the Second World War and the bombing of Dresden; what the author had to do after the city was bombed and its effect on him; and the end of World War II.

4

A fourth way of beginning to teach the novel would be to read the title page, the dedication and the epigraph. Once again various themes would need to be explored: what *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Children's Crusade* and a *Duty-Dance with Death* are. One would also need to explain who Kurt Vonnegut is and how he survived the war and, in addition, why this novel, when it was first published in 1969, was considered to be science fiction and anti-war. The dedication to a man and a woman from different countries which had been at war could then be discussed, leaving a more detailed discussion of the two people until after the first chapter has been read.

Similarly one could discuss why a verse of the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger" was used as an epigraph. Here one could ask how this verse is related to the title page and whether any new elements or ideas are being introduced. In this context it is important to emphasize that we have Jesus as a baby who does not cry and that later in his life he taught that compassion is a cardinal virtue and that one should not take an eye for an eye but turn the other cheek.

5

A fifth possibility would be to give the pupils quotes related to various themes, for example war, death, suffering, time, predestination, free will and compassion to help them to understand what this novel is about before reading it closely.

A list of quotes and passages could include the following:

Time

(p.27 ll.10 - 13) "Billy is spastic in time", no control over his movements in the fourth dimension

(p.47 ll.4 - 10) "Unstuck in time", he travels through his whole life, up to his death and back again.

(p.89 ll.19 - 23) Time does not mean you can change the course of events. No free will, like "bugs in amber."

(p.77 l.20 - p.79 l.5) Films can go backwards and forwards in time.

Predestination and Free Will

(p.64 ll.24f.) Billy's powerlessness to change anything

(p.47 ll.18 - 23) He wishes to escape his suffering but is unable to prevent his rescue.

(p.120 l.20 - p.121 l.3) The inevitability of the destruction of the universe.

(p.90 ll.1 - 5) Free will is considered an absurd notion by the Tralfamadorians.

Suffering and Compassion

(p.42 ll.6 - 12) Christ's suffering and Billy's feeling of pity for him

(p.197 ll.20 - 25) Billy cries and pities the horses because they suffer.

(p.162 ll.18 - 20) He is kind to Derby who has suffered so much deprivation and hunger.

(p.65 ll.9 - 14) His crying relieves his complaint. He suffers but doesn't know why.

War and Death

(p.8 ll.11 - 19) War like death is inevitable.

(p.19 ll.7 - 10) War should not be made glamorous thus encouraging it.

(p.124 ll.16 - 19) The connection between war, sex and glamour.

(p.23 ll.24 - 26) The narrator doesn't want his sons to kill or to be pleased by killing.

(p.70 ll.17 - 21) Wild Bob's regiment is destroyed

(p.71 ll.13 - 17) He loses touch with reality and will shortly die.

(p.149 ll.1 - 3) Irony: The reader knows Dresden will be destroyed.

(p.178 ll.19 - 24) A beautiful city becomes a barren moonscape.

(p.214 ll.10 - 13) The stench of death likened to the smell of roses and mustard gas.

6

A sixth way would be to have the pupils start out by reading young Pfc. Kurt Vonnegut's letter to his parents (pp. 221-224) as this shows his first-hand experience of the fire-bombing of Dresden. This letter has been called a "first draft" of the novel. Vonnegut's comments "But I didn't" and "But not me" in a way "pre-echo" the "So it goes" of the novel.

This approach can be combined with any of the five approaches mentioned above.

7

A seventh way of introducing the novel would be to take texts on memory and post-traumatic stress disorder or syndrome and then relating these topics to both Kurt Vonnegut and Billy. Here one could use the following or similar websites:

www.Militaryminds.ca

<http://www.ctvnews.ca/health/canadian-corporal-creates-online-forum-for-soldiers-with-ptsd-1.1429445>

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/memory/understand/forgetting

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/memory/understand/post_traumatic_stress_disorder.shtml

www.combatstress.org.uk/veterans/symptoms-of-trauma

For other sites just search the web for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

8

Finally one could use one of the many anti-war songs of the counterculture; such as Bob Dylan's "With God On Our Side", Edwin Starr's "War", or "I Ain't Marching Any More" by Phil Ochs together with the review of Vonnegut's novel in The New York Times, March 31st. 1969. The review provides a good introduction to the themes of the novel and in particular poses the question; "...how did the youth who lived through the Dresden bombing grow up to be the man who wrote this book?"

B. While-reading tasks

The tasks below can be assigned to different groups or individual pupils. The pupils should be admonished to note down the exact page and line references

1. As you read, collect all references to Billy Pilgrim's biography and arrange them chronologically (see the list in the section "Billy Pilgrim" below).
2. As you read, collect all references to Jesus, Christianity, the Bible and to religion in general (see the list in the section "Vonnegut the Humanist" below).
3. Pay particular attention to the narrator(s) in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Who is the narrator in chapter one, who in chapters two to nine? Does the narrator from chapter one make any appearances in the main narrative (chapters two to nine)? If so, where and how?
4. The fictitious science-fiction author Kilgore Trout first appears on page 104. Collect the ideas expressed in his various works (see the table in the section "Kilgore Trout" below).
5. Collect all the information about the Tralfamadorians, their world and their philosophy.

C. Helping pupils to understand the novel

The expression “so it goes” has now entered the English language. It expresses something like “that’s life”; “What is, is. It cannot be changed;” “You must accept the inevitable;” or, to put it more crudely, “shit happens”.

As Vonnegut writes in the first chapter, “And even if wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death” (p.8 ll.18/19). “So it goes.” occurs over a hundred times in this book. It is used like a Greek chorus drawing the reader’s attention to death. Death is not just limited and linked to human beings but also to inanimate things (p.106 ll.3/4), to pictures stuck on television screens (p.116 ll.17 - 19), to animals (p.159 ll.12/13 and p.165 ll.26/27), to the bombing of German cities (p.151 ll.12/13), to a battle in Vietnam (p.137 ll.20/21), to the future hydrogen bombing of Chicago by Chinamen (p.144 ll.15f.), and to the accidental destruction of the entire universe (p.120 ll.20 - 23).

“So it goes.” underlines not only the universal nature of death but also that nothing is exempt from it. The expression clearly serves two other purposes. One is to show that many deaths are caused by human beings and thus by implication could quite possibly be avoided, and the other purpose is that it underlines Vonnegut’s black humour. A good example of this humour is when you have the destruction of Dresden (p.166 ll.10 - 12) followed by the next “So it goes” (p.168 ll.1 - 6) after a satirical story of human greed. This leads on to the next example (p.171 ll.22 - 24) where Kilgore Trout allows the reader to join him in making fun of a dull person (Maggie White).

Vonnegut’s black humour then becomes clear when you realize that the next example of “So it goes” (p.178 ll.5 - 9) concerns the deaths of Billy’s guards and their families in the Dresden fire storm. In this way Vonnegut intersperses two humorous episodes within the framework of Dresden’s destruction and a great loss of life. This is a Shakespearian device to allow the reader to laugh and it helps him to release tension and distract him from the horror he has just been confronted with. Vonnegut was obviously aware of this effect, as his remarks in “The Science-Fiction Mode” (p.235) make quite clear.

Tasks

- › **How do you understand the expression “So it goes”?**
- › **Why is the expression “So it goes” used so many times in Slaughterhouse-Five?**

D. Billy Pilgrim

Billy, as his last name suggests, is a pilgrim. His family name comes from John Bunyan's famous Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*. His first name William is changed to Billy by his father-in-law for business reasons (p.50 ll.8 - 15). He also sets Billy up in business as an optometrist, and, without really knowing why, Billy becomes very well off. Yet he decides very little in his life. Either people, like his daughter, decide for him (p.134 ll.21 - 23) or he does things he really does not want to do (p.111 ll.20 - 23). Both as a POW and on Tralfamadore he is at the mercy of his captors. This passivity is reflected in the fact that he becomes unstuck in time: he "has no control over where he is going next" (p.27 ll.10f.).

This is typical of somebody suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The only time when Billy actively remembers an experience (p.177 ll.25f.) is when he is reminded of his four German guards on the night when Dresden was fire-bombed. Otherwise he is at the mercy of what arbitrarily comes into his mind.

In the novel it is not made clear whether Billy travels in space and time or whether he is mentally ill. The explanation for his strange new ideas is to be found in his new way of seeing after he is thrown into some shrubbery (p.67 l.26 - p.68 l.3). After the war he has a nervous breakdown in 1948 because he finds life meaningless, just like a fellow patient, Eliot Rosewater. They both want to re-invent themselves (p.105 ll.12f.). Science-fiction in the form of Kilgore Trout's novels is a big help.

Twenty years later Billy receives serious head injuries in a plane crash where he is the sole survivor (p. 29 l.5; there is a contradiction here to what is written on p.158 ll.3f.: a co-pilot also survives.) Now Billy wants to teach human beings what he has learned on Tralfamadore. They should view the world as the Tralfamadoreans do (p.32 l.24 - p.33 l.2) to help them to better come to terms with life on earth.

This fatalistic view of life is reflected in the fact that Billy himself foretells his own death and accepts it (p.144 ll.7f.) rebuking those who want him to live on (p.144 ll.27 - 31).

A Timeline of Billy Pilgrim's Life

1922 Billy is born in Ilium (a fictitious town in eastern New York State). (p.27)

As a young baby in a rosy room, after having been bathed by his mother. (p.88)

As a little boy thrown into a swimming pool by his father, sink or swim. It is like an execution. (p.47)

1934 Twelve years old, Grand Canyon, Bright Angel Point, he wets his pants, fear of falling (pp.92f)

10 days later Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico. The lights are turned off; in total darkness; Billy does not know whether he is alive or not. (pp.93f.)

Billy's mother buys him a crucifix from a gift shop in Santa Fe during a trip out West during the Great Depression. (p.42)

1938 Billy 16 years old in a doctor's waiting room with an infected thumb, meets an old man in agony because of gases in his stomach (pp.189f.)

1944 Billy joins the army and is a chaplain's assistant, a traditional figure of fun in the army. During his training he is given an emergency furlough home because his father, a barber, is shot dead by a friend in a hunting accident. (pp.34f.)

Billy is sent to Europe and takes part in the Battle of the Bulge. (pp.35f.)

He is captured behind German lines in a Luxembourg forest. (pp.56ff.)

Billy is thrown into some shrubbery for a propaganda picture. (p.62)

Ever since this incident he sees things with St. Elmo's fire around them. (pp.67f.)

He spends Christmas on a POW train. (p.75)

Billy and his fellow prisoners are taken to a POW camp on the Czechoslovakian border. (pp.96ff.)

January 1945 Billy arrives in Dresden, housed in Slaughterhouse 5, works in a factory producing syrup for pregnant women. (p.150ff.)

13th February 1945 The Allies fire-bomb Dresden. (p.177)

Next day Billy leaves the slaughterhouse and sees the destruction and is shot at by American fighter planes. He sleeps in the blind innkeeper's stable. (pp.180f.)

Two days later he has to carry dead bodies, retrieved from the rubble and cellars. (pp.213f.)

May 1945 End of the war in Europe. (p.194)

Billy is discharged from the army. (pp.27f.)

1948 Billy in hospital recovering from a nervous breakdown meets Eliot Rosewater who introduces him to the novels of Kilgore Trout. (pp.103f.)

Billy's mother visits him in the hospital; this upsets him. (p.106)

Six months later (cf. p.121 l.22) he marries Valencia Merble and is set up in the optometry business by his father-in-law. (p.28)

During the next years he makes very good money, fathers two children. (p.28)

1957 Billy is elected President of the Lions Club. (p.53)

1958 At a party he gets drunk and commits adultery for the first and only time in his life and explains why he calls himself Billy rather than William. He then falls asleep in the back of a car. (pp.49ff.)

1964 He meets Kilgore Trout in person for the first time and invites him to his eighteenth wedding anniversary. (pp.167ff. There is an inconsistency in the novel's chronology here: Since he got married in 1948, the eighteenth anniversary should be in 1966.)

Two days later At the anniversary party, Billy remembers an event in the meat locker. He does not travel in time to this experience. (p.177)

1965 Billy visits his mother in an old people's home. (pp.47f.)

1967 There are race riots in Billy's home town. The Vietnam War is raging. (pp.62ff.)

Billy's daughter, Barbara, marries. He is kidnapped on the same night and taken by Tralfamadorians to their planet where he is put naked into a zoo. (pp. 26, 79ff.)

Later he is joined by Montana Wildhack. (p.135)

They have a child. (p.207)

1968 Billy survives a plane crash. He and the copilot are the only ones alive. (p.158. A possible contradiction here: "Everybody was killed but Billy" p.29.)

Valencia wants to visit Billy in hospital but dies in a freak car accident. (pp.183f.)

He shares a room with a history professor, Bertram Copeland Rumfoord. (pp.184ff.)

Billy's son, Robert, a highly decorated Green Beret flies home from Vietnam and visits him. (p.190)

After his daughter takes him home he sneaks out of the house and checks into a hotel in New York City. (p.199)

Then he visits a pornographic bookstore with Kilgore Trout novels as window dressing and sees Montana Wildhack in a girly magazine. (pp.20ff.)

Afterwards he gets on a radio show about whether the novel is dead or not, starts talking about the Tralfamadorians and is expelled during the first commercial break. (pp.206f.)

One month later he writes a letter to the Ilium News Leader about the Tralfamadorians. (p.30)

He compares this to "prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls." (pp.32f.)

13th February 1976 After speaking about flying saucers and time at a Chicago baseball park, Billy is assassinated. (p.145)

E. Comparison between Kurt Vonnegut/the narrator and Billy Pilgrim

Both Billy and Kurt Vonnegut have similar war experiences as is shown by Vonnegut's letter home to his family after the end of the war (pp.221 - 224). Billy, unstuck in time, is controlled by forces beyond his control and has a nervous breakdown which his doctors think is caused by childhood trauma, not by the war (p.104 ll.9 - 20). The narrator in chapter one obviously drinks too much as a result of his wartime experiences (p.8 l.28 - p.9 l.2).

Billy is basically passive during his time as a POW in Germany, whereas Vonnegut was a spokesman at his POW camp until he told his German guards what he thought about the way they treated their prisoners. For this he was beaten and relieved of his position (p.222 l.21 - p.223 l.3). In this respect he acts more like Edgar Derby in the novel.

Both Billy and Vonnegut are in Dresden when it is fire-bombed. After the war and after his plane crash Billy, talking to Bertram Copeland Rumfoord (p.199 ll.1 - 13), emphasizes how dreadful the bombing was and that he pities the men who had to do it. But it cannot be changed, all he can do is feel pity and bear witness (p.194 l.14): "I was there." Similarly Vonnegut was also there and by writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* he also bears witness and shows pity and compassion. By dedicating his book to Mary O'Hare, a nurse, and by contrasting Rumfoord's view that weak people should die with the compassionate attitude of the hospital staff, Vonnegut shows – like Jesus whom he respects greatly – that he too supports the saving of human life. It may be necessary to fight a just war but one should feel compassion for one's enemies and not be indifferent to their suffering.

Billy, by contrast, accepts this suffering as unavoidable with his Tralfamadorian view that everything is preordained. Vonnegut, however, with his presentation of the suffering in the Second World War and with his many criticisms of the Vietnam War (p.64 ll.2 - 7 or p.210 ll.7f.) implicitly makes the case that it is possible to change this situation, even if there have always been wars up until now. Unlike Billy his book makes clear that wars are only inevitable if people go on fighting them. After all the narrator says that the veterans who hated the war most, were the ones who had really fought (p.15 ll.11 - 13), just like Vonnegut himself.

Questions

1. Do their names tell us anything about them?
2. Referring to Kurt Vonnegut's first letter home after the end of WW2 (pp. 221 - 224) compare and contrast his war experiences with Billy Pilgrim's experiences.
3. Compare and contrast their experiences of life. Do they have any experiences in common?
4. How do they deal with their experiences?
5. Do they have different views of the world?

F. Vonnegut the humanist

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the many references to Christianity, the Bible and Jesus have received little critical attention with the exception of Helena Bertram Gräfin von Nimcz zu Caldaha's perceptive study *There Is No Why, Religion und Gottesbild im Werk von Kurt Vonnegut anhand ausgewählter Romane* (2009 HEBE Verlag).

Vonnegut's parents brought him up with humanistic values and in his young years he was an atheist. Yet in *Palm Sunday* p.229 (London: Granada, 1982) he describes himself as being a "Christ-worshipping agnostic". This seemingly contradictory statement is resolved as soon as you make the distinction between Jesus and the church as an institution. Jesus's values as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chs. 5, 6 and 7) and those expressed by him in chapter five, "The Grand Inquisitor", of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (the novel is mentioned on p.105 l.17 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*) make Vonnegut's ideas quite clear. However, he does not state them directly. His many references to Christianity, the Bible and Jesus (see the list below) provide a direct link to Billy and by implication characterize him as a compassionate character.

The readers may ask themselves why there are so many references to Jesus in this book. Vonnegut does not directly state his approval of what Jesus represents, rather he wants the readers to think for themselves. He does not want to push his ideas down the readers' throats, but he does want them to use their reason and think about what is going on in the world.

Billy shares many characteristics with Jesus. He shows great compassion, turns the other cheek when Roland Weary beats him (p.55 ll.5f.) and foretells his own death (p.144 ll.7f.). He also wants people to accept the Trafal-madorians' view that everything is preordained and that free will is a delusion (p.29 l.24 - p.30 l.5). By implication Vonnegut's book suggests that man does have a choice and that he does have a certain amount of free will and that he should use it. Ironically the only real decision that Billy makes in his life is to preach his gospel of pre-determinism and this, of course, he does of his own free will, in spite of the fact that he is considered to be senile (p.32 ll.24 - 27). Vonnegut is, therefore, suggesting by implication that the reader in contrast to Billy and his ideas does have a choice to make. This choice is between passively accepting the world as it is or changing it where possible. The basis for this change is feeling compassion for those who have suffered, even for your enemies, which, of course, Billy does. Vonnegut obviously shares this compassion for those Germans who suffered and died during the Second World War. He makes this quite clear by dedicating his book to a German taxi driver whose mother died in the Dresden fire-bombing. For Vonnegut feeling compassion is a precondition for behaving decently towards your fellow human beings.

As he himself wrote "Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead." (*God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, 1999)

Although Billy Pilgrim and Kurt Vonnegut share the same war experiences and although they both bear witness, feel pity and show compassion, they have quite different attitudes to life. Whereas Billy is a fatalist who seems to believe in predestination (the remark "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" p.64 ll.24f. describes him well), Kurt Vonnegut is an idealist who believes that change is possible.

References and allusions to Christianity, the Bible and Jesus

The title page: The Children's Crusade

Epigraph p.5: Away in a Manger, verse 3 (Christmas carol): No crying He makes

p.26 ll.2ff.: Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife (Genesis 19: 23ff.)

p.34 l.15: Billy, as a chaplain's valet, "had a meek faith in a loving Jesus"

p.42 ll.6ff.: crucifix, Billy's Christ "was pitiful"

p.57 ll.7ff.: Adam and Eve

p.58 ll.21ff.: a bullet-proof Bible

p.75 ll.15f.: Christmas night, 24th-25th Dec.

p.82 l.2: the diagonal cross-brace

p.83 l.26: "self-crucified"

pp.112f.: The Gospel from Outer Space by Kilgore Trout. Jesus perceived as a nobody.

p.128 l.19: "vision of Hell" (the latrines)

p.140 l.11: Golgotha sounds (building new latrines)

p.144 ll.25ff.: When he announces that his death at the hands of an assassin is imminent and when there are protests from the crowd, "Billy Pilgrim rebukes them" just as Christ rebuked Peter (Mark 8:33)

p.145 ll.7f.: "It is time for me to be dead for a little while – and then live again."

p.151 l.2: Dresden, "a Sunday school picture of Heaven"

p.172 l.18: Judgment Day (Heaven and Hell)

p.196 ll.16f.: pitying tones "might have been those used by the friends of Jesus when they took His ruined body down from His cross."

p.197 ll.23ff.: Billy cries.

p.198 l.4: direct comparison with Christ in the carol

p.203 ll.10ff.: Jesus and Joseph build a cross

p.204 ll.23f.: "The Son of God was dead as a doornail."

p.210 ll.13ff.: little interest in Jesus on Tralfamadore, more in Darwin's theories

G. Kilgore Trout

Billy describes him as a “cracked messiah” (p.167 l.21). He is the author of SF stories that are a decisive influence on Billy Pilgrim’s life. He is introduced to them by Eliot Rosewater (p.104 l.24) at the veterans’ hospital while he is recovering from a nervous breakdown in 1948. Both men are looking for meaning in their lives and Kilgore Trout’s stories give it to them. On p.105 ll.15-24 Rosewater explains to Billy that everything there is to know about life is not enough any more and that new lies are needed otherwise people will not want to go on living.

After meeting Kilgore Trout in person Billy invites him to his 18th wedding anniversary. Kilgore is the only person there who is not associated with optometry and the only person not wearing glasses (p.170 ll.27 - 29). Although he is a terrible writer, his ideas are good (p.114 ll.6-8). His ideas are to be found in the six stories mentioned in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Title of the story	What happens?	How can it be understood?	Is there a meaning for the reader?
<i>Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension</i> (p.108 ll.6-16)			
<i>The Gospel from Outer Space</i> (p.112 l.17 - p.113 l.27)			
No title (p.168 ll.1-6) about a money tree			
<i>The Gutless Wonder</i> (p.168 l.16 - p.169 l.3)			
<i>The Big Board</i> (p.201 l.27- p.203 l.3 also p.210 ll.13 - 21)			
No title (p.203 l.5 - 16 and p.204 l.11 - 28) about a time machine			

Possible answers (p. 1/2)

Title of the story	What happens?	How can it be understood?	Is there a meaning for the reader?
<i>Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension</i> (p.108 ll.6-16)	The causes for certain mental diseases are in the fourth dimension where you find mythical beings and heaven and hell. Thus these diseases cannot be treated by three-dimensional Earthlings.	As long as Earthlings perceive the world in only three dimensions they will never understand it properly.	Human beings should try and look beyond the explanations given to them for phenomena in their world.
<i>The Gospel from Outer Space</i> (p.112 l.17 - p.113 l.27)	A visitor from outer space wants to make a serious study of Christianity to discover why Christians found it so easy to be cruel. The intent of the Gospels was to teach people to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low. But what they really taught was: Do not kill people who are well connected. The people concluded that those who are not well connected can safely be killed. The visitor gave the people a new Gospel in which Jesus really was a nobody. When the people crucified Jesus, God made clear he would punish horribly anyone who torments somebody with no connections.	The idea that there are right and wrong people who can be killed is erroneous.	Not only the lives of the rich and powerful have to be respected but also the lives of the weak and poor.
No title (p.168 ll.1-6) about a money tree	A tree whose leaves, flowers and fruit are in the form of money or valuables causes people to kill each other by the tree to get these things. Thus dead people provide the tree with very good fertilizer.	People who kill each other for material reasons perpetuate a vicious circle of violence. Greed breeds greed.	The Christian idea that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).
<i>The Gutless Wonder</i> (p.168 l.16 - p.169 l.3)	About a robot with bad breath who is socially accepted once his halitosis is cured. The story, written in 1932, is remarkable because it predicts the use of napalm as weapon of war.	The dropping of a horrific weapon, whose consequences on other human beings are not seen, does not trouble the pilots at all.	Bomber pilots find it easy to kill as they do not see the consequences of their actions and the destruction which they cause.

Possible answers (p. 2/2)

Title of the story	What happens?	How can it be understood?	Is there a meaning for the reader?
<i>The Big Board</i> (p.201 l.27- p.203 l.3 also p.210 ll.13 - 21)	<p>A story of an Earthling man and woman kidnapped by extra-terrestrials and put on display in a zoo on the planet Zircon-212. To keep the captives busy their keepers put up a big board showing stock market prices and tell them they can play the market. Both the money and the market are illusory but they don't know this. They do very well on paper but after a bad week the news ticker reminds them it is National Prayer Week. They pray and up go their investments.</p> <p>The aliens are not interested in Christianity, but rather ask them about Darwin and golf.</p>	<p>There is an obvious parallel to Billy and Montana's captivity on Tralfamadore.</p> <p>Human beings can be easily fooled when money is involved and religion in the form of prayer is also an illusion.</p> <p>(The behaviour of the couple is very similar to what behaviourist B.F. Skinner called "superstitious behaviour" in pigeons.)</p>	<p>If the couple in the story are so easily fooled, should we believe that Billy is really on Tralfamadore or is this a fantasy which is only in his mind?</p>
No title (p.203 l.5 - 16 and p.204 l.11 - 28) about a time machine	<p>A time traveller wants to find out if Jesus really died on the cross. He first sees the twelve-year-old Jesus with his father making a cross for the execution of a rabble-rouser.</p> <p>Later when Jesus is taken down from the cross, the time traveller, using a stethoscope, ascertains that Jesus, the Son of God, is as dead as a doornail.</p>	<p>Jesus is a normal and mortal human being who wants to make a living even if he is the Son of God.</p>	<p>If such a good person as Jesus is a human being, is it not possible for others to follow his example of preaching forgiveness and compassion?</p>

H. Edgar Derby: the only real character

When Edgar Derby gets up to answer the American Nazi propagandist Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the narrator / Kurt Vonnegut describes this as “probably the finest moment in his life” (p.164 ll. 24f.). The narrator goes on to say that Edgar Derby is the only real character in the book (p.164 l.25 - p.165 l.4).

Derby, rather courageously, considering the circumstances, gives a moving speech extolling American values and his belief that they are worth dying for (p.165 ll.13 - 16). These values give legitimacy to a just cause and a just war (cf. p.234 “A Just War”). Edgar is middle-aged, just like Vonnegut when he wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and his name suggests (Derby hats were old-fashioned at the time and only worn by elderly men) that he is not one of Mary O’Hare’s babies who went to war. He pulled strings to be allowed to get into the war, to fight the good fight.

He is a kind and compassionate man (p.87 ll.5 - 15), holding Roland Weary in his arms as he dies and watching over a sedated Billy in the POW camp (p.103 ll.2 - 8). Yet this compassionate and patriotic man is doomed. From the third sentence of the first chapter the reader is continually reminded that Derby will be shot for a disproportionately trivial offence. He is the character who evokes the most sympathy from the reader because he behaves decently, just like the innocent and vulnerable Adam and Eve that Billy loves (p.57 ll.12f.).

Tasks

- › ***Why does Edgar Derby want to fight in the war?***
- › ***Is there a connection between Kurt Vonnegut and Edgar Derby?***
- › ***What role does Edgar Derby play in Slaughterhouse-Five?***

I. Narrators

A **first-person narrator** in the first and tenth chapters. Is this narrator identical with Kurt Vonnegut, the author, or is he, at least in part, a fiction, a character?

A **third-person omniscient narrator** in the second to ninth chapters and partly in chapter 10.

A **peripheral first-person narrator**: the first-person narrator we met in chapter one introduces himself and comments on events or makes remarks about characters and events in the main narrative.

Instances of this:

"I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (p.71 l.25).

"A crazy thought now occurred to Billy. The truth of it startled him. It would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim—and for me, too" (p.125 ll.10ff.).

"That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (p.128 l.18).

"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" (151 ll.4 - 6).

"There are almost no [...] was a character now" (p.164 l.25 - p.165 l.4).

"the argument with his daughter with which this tale began." (p. 166 l.14)

Which is why the epigraph of this book is the quatrain from the famous Christmas carol. (p.198 ll.1f.)

Questions

1. What is the purpose and effect of using different narrators?
2. Can one make a meaningful distinction between Kurt Vonnegut as a person and the author of this novel and the three different types of narrator in it?

J. Criticism of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and what it says about the critics

Since its publication in 1969 *Slaughterhouse-Five* has caused fierce controversy in the United States. Critics have considered it to be dangerous for young minds because of its violent, irreverent, profane, sexually explicit and anti-American content. They argue that it should be banned and many schools have done so. It has even been the object of a legal battle that ended up before the United States Supreme Court in 1982 (Island Trees School District versus Pico). The court upheld the right of students to read it and of teachers to teach it.

The book is considered to be “un-American” because of its portrayal of soldiers as weak, misguided and simple-minded and because of having too much sympathy for America’s enemies. The other aspect which caused harsh criticism is its obscene language (p.37 l.17 - 22) and its frank, if emotionally empty, depictions of bodily functions (p.116 ll.20 - 23) and of sexuality (p.121 l.28 - p.122 l.12), including references to pornography (p.203 ll.18 - 24 or p.205 ll.1 - 14), and, in addition, its irreverent attitude to religion (e.g. the remark “The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty”, p.38 ll.12 - 14).

All the above quotes can be read as examples of Vonnegut’s use of irony and black humour. He criticizes with them the humourless morality of people who know what is good for you. At the same time the rank and file soldiers who bore the brunt of the fighting are only expected to obey orders and not to use their critical faculties. They have, in fact, been reduced to their drives and physical functions. Humourless moralists who only pick out disparate aspects of the novel that criticize and poke fun at their ideas, ignore what the author is suggesting about the childish way in which soldiers are treated. It is not without good reason that the subtitle of the novel is “THE CHILDREN’S CRUSADE - A DUTY-DANCE WITH DEATH.”

Tasks

1. Explain why *Slaughterhouse-Five* meets with so much criticism.
2. Quote examples of what you think is Vonnegut’s humour.
3. What do you think Vonnegut is trying to make his readers understand with this sentence?
“The nicest veterans in Schenectady, I thought, the kindest and funniest ones, the ones who hated war the most, were the ones who’d really fought.”
(p.15 ll.11 - 13)

K. Differences between the film and the novel

It is not really advisable for pupils to watch the film of *Slaughterhouse-Five* before having read the whole book as there are real differences between the two which could easily lead to confusion. These include the leaving out of the entire first chapter and half of the tenth so that an important layer of meaning reflected in the first-person singular narrator / Kurt Vonnegut is missing.

There is also no mention of Mary O'Hare or Gerhard Müller to whom the book is dedicated or Mary's husband, Bernard V. O'Hare, Vonnegut's war buddy. Even more importantly Kilgore Trout, who is so important for understanding the way Billy thinks, is also not mentioned.

Another difference is that Paul Lazzaro is not a chicken of a man (see the way he is described on p. 87 ll. 21 – 24) but a well-built bully. He and not Roland Weary is with Billy when he is captured by some German soldiers. Weary appears later in the film when Billy keeps treading on his feet.

Another important difference is that Montana Wildhack who only appears in the second half of the book has a very different function in the film. The final scene where she is breast-feeding her baby suggests that she and Billy will live happily ever after on Tralfamadore with their child. Hence the firework display at the end of the final scene.

One way in which the film is easier to follow than the book is achieved through the juxtaposing of related scenes. Due to the structure of the novel the relationship between certain scenes does not immediately become clear to the reader. A good example of this is Billy's acceptance speech at the Lion's club and Edgar Derby's speech when he becomes the spokesman for the POWs.

The music and colours which are mentioned in the novel can, of course, be more poignantly emphasized visually and audibly in the film. It does, however, mean a forfeiting of subtlety.

Tasks

- › **List the differences between the novel and the film.**
- › **Did you find the film more interesting or easier to understand than the book?**
- › **Please compare the ending of the film with the final scenes in the book.**
- › **Why do you think Kilgore Trout has not been included in the film?**
- › **Do you think it matters that the first chapter of the novel has been completely left out of the film?**

L. Post-reading

Related Topic

The Bombers and the Bombed: Air warfare in WWII. Read and discuss the texts on pp. 225 – 229. Topic “The Battle of Britain”. Recommended feature films: Mrs. Miniver, Battle of Britain. Documentary films on the London Blitz. (Search YouTube with keywords such as “London Blitz”, “Coventry bombing”, “strategic bombing”.)

Reports/Presentations to the class

1. The Coventry-Dresden twinning
2. The Battle of Britain
3. John Wayne (the type of person he often portrayed, e.g. in The Green Berets).
4. Earl Warren’s Supreme Court
5. The U.S.A. in the 1960s: The Struggle for Civil Rights, Protesting the Vietnam War
6. Driving through Ilium’s black ghetto in 1967 Billy finds that “The people who lived here hated it so much that they had burned down a lot of it a month before.” (p. 62). Give a report on the major race riots in the U.S.A. during that year.
7. The 1964/1965 World’s Fair: Traveling across Time and Space with Ford, Walt Disney and General Motors (cf. p. 22)
8. Report on what the behaviorist psychologist B.F. Skinner called “superstitious behavior”. Can the behaviour of the people in Kilgore Trout’s novel *The Big Board* be called superstitious?

Topics for Essays

1. How do you understand Vonnegut’s remark that “the science-fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clowns in Shakespeare. When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he’d let up a little, bring on a clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he’d become serious again” (p. 235)?
2. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has repeatedly been banned from school libraries in the United States. Can you think of possible reasons for this? How would you react as a student/parent?
3. Bernard V. O’Hare III, son of Bernard V. O’Hare, Jr., posted Kurt Vonnegut’s letter to his parents (cf. pp. 221 – 224) on his blog in 2007, writing that “In many ways, this three-page letter is his first draft of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut sent my family a copy of that letter, apparently as a Christmas present, in 1996.” (<http://lehighvalleyramblings.blogspot.de/2007/12/christmas-present-from-kurt-vonnegut.html>) Do you agree with O’Hare’s judgement? Give reasons.