

# Initial Study Questions for Reading *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

**N** What do we learn from the title page? What do you think the novel is going to be about? Actually the title hints at the four main settings or realms in which the novel takes place, for times and places for the plot to develop. Can you figure out what these four strands are?

**N** What ideas and images begin to be repeated as you move from the title page through the dedication and epigraph to the beginning of the book? These repeated ideas and images (as well as repeated words and phrases) help you identify major THEMES in the book. Major themes introduced in the first chapter which extend through the whole novel include:

Ureligion/Christianity/Jesus

Ufatalism/ lack of action/ stoicism/ passivity

Uthe horrors/ coldness/ inhumanity of war

Uimportance of love/ friendship/ comradeship/ simple human warmth

Urelativism/ lack of absolute values/ loss of meaning for life

Ustructure of the novel:: structure of time:: structure of reality

Umaterialism and worship of object as inadequate source of meaning for life

**N** Try to find places in the first chapter and in subsequent chapters where these themes come up. Start keeping notes on themes: a list of page numbers for each category.

**N** “All this really happened, more or less.” -- What is the point of telling us right at the beginning what happens at the end and also of undercutting the literal truth of the story he is telling?

**N** “If the accident will.” -- What does this mean? Who are what usually wills things? Does this connect up in any way with the limerick which follows? What is the point of the limerick anyway? What do these two passages tell us about the author’s views on life, war, and God? Why does this phrase lead Vonnegut to dedicate the book to Gerhard Muller?

**N** Why anti-glacier? How is war like a glacier?

**N** What do the stories about the Eiffel Tower and the man in the elevator with the wedding ring have to in common? What is Vonnegut saying here about materialistic value systems?

**N** As an anthropology major, Vonnegut learned that there are no such things as villains. What does he think about heroes? What is Mary O’Hare’s attitude towards heroes? As you move into the book you will need to think about whether Billy Pilgrim is a hero and whether there are characters who could be called villains.

**N** Why does Vonnegut love Lot’s wife? What does being “human” mean to him?