



Eleanor Roosevelt High School

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11th Grade American Literature Summer Assignment – 2011-2012

BOOK: SLAUGHTERHOUSE-5, OR THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE; KURT VONNEGUT

All this happened, more or less. (opening sentence)

That was me. That was I. That was the author of this book. (repeated)

–Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-5*

Stories are a contract between the author and the reader: writers are expected to produce an engaging version of reality which is ultimately revelatory of some truth of human character or experience; readers are expected to look for clues as to the author's purpose, and to follow details carefully, in their quest for understanding the story's messages. *Slaughterhouse-5* deals with the border between fiction and fact, the way in which in telling a story about something that has happened we inevitably shape and transform it. Vonnegut is interested in what the reader's reaction to the story reveals about our expectations.

As the availability of "information" multiplies, we are expected to know how to judge the truth of a story for ourselves, and to acknowledge that much around us is a construction—one person's view of reality, filtered, rather than an "objective truth." Because literature is an art, its purpose is not simply to tell us what happened. As a result, many fiction writers—like Flannery O'Connor—have argued that a deliberately distorted narrative reveals more about reality than any attempt to be "realistic." Why?

READING AND JOURNALING ASSIGNMENT

Start a reading journal. After each reading session, jot the date, the time you read, and the pages you read and write down your responses. Start with your reading **EXPERIENCE**. This is your 'pre-critical' response and should freely explore your impressions, emotional responses and questions. This is the key to writing about literature in an engaging way. This is 'writing to understand' NOT writing to explain. No interpretation, no plot summary. Not yet (see below) ...

ESSAY PREPARATION (connects to the in class essay on the reverse)

Now go back over what you read that day/night and throw down a post-it for any passage that connects to the essay questions that follow. Write on the post-it HOW it connects. If you have a big response to a passage and see it as potentially useful for the essay, you may explore that in your journal but **FIRST** write in your journal "MOVING ON TO INTERPRETATION" for that entry. The journals will be graded – label them clearly!



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(11th Grade Summer Assignment 2011-2012 continued)

ESSAY QUESTIONS:

- What makes us expect to find “truth” in what is obviously made up? Are reality and truth the same?
- What expectations do we bring to any reading? What happens when our expectations are undermined or challenged?

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

(will be done as an **in class** essay in early September)

Your essay when you return will focus on the two questions bullet pointed above and ask you to approach those questions by analyzing Vonnegut’s unconventional methods of story-telling:

- the use of humor;
- the presentation of alternative versions of traumatic events;
- the frame in which Vonnegut presents his book as “a true story”;
- the improbable/“fantastical” plot turns;
- the insertion of Vonnegut’s persona into the events of the narrative.

It is important that you reference your reading experiences in this essay - your emotional responses, impressions and questions - and be led by those. I suggest you actually do not start your Summer reading until mid August so that it is fresh in your mind when you write your essay.

Additional questions you may want to address:

What is the purpose of imagination? How does it enable us to make sense of events that are otherwise unbearable?

What can we learn through symbol, metaphor, and the “fantastic,” that we cannot through fact?