

***Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut**
Discussion questions

1. What do you think about Vonnegut's style? The drawings, page breaks and self-referential moments are a radical departure from the standard novel. Do they add to the story or detract from it?
2. One theme of *Breakfast of Champions* is humans as machines. How are people like machines? What are the possible results of such a worldview? Are there any positive aspects to seeing humans as machines?
3. How are machines themselves depicted? How do they make the characters' lives better or worse? What do they represent?
4. In your opinion, is the narrator racist? Sexist? Homophobic? He points out the racist views of certain characters, recounts instances of violence against women, and shows derogatory views of transvestite and gay characters. How are African Americans depicted? Women? Are their concerns given weight in the context of the narrative?
5. How is advertising used in the story? There are many instances of written advertisements (including the names of the trucks in which Kilgore Trout rides to Midland City) and radio advertisements and the title itself is the slogan of a popular cereal. How do various characters react to the advertisements? What do the advertisements say about the power of the written and spoken word?
6. Discuss the significance of the phrase "Goodbye, Blue Monday," the alternate title of the book, as well as the motto of the *Robo-Magic* company which Dwayne Hoover was able to sell in order to buy the Pontiac agency.
7. What do the many references to mirrors mean? Trout calls them "leaks" and pretends they are holes between two universes. When Sugar Creek floods it forms "a vast mirror in which children might safely play," the narrator wears mirrored sunglasses to remain incognito when he goes to the Holiday Inn, and there are many mirrors in the hotel's lobby.
8. How is an apple used as a symbol? There are two drawings of an apple: one is when the narrator discusses how the atmosphere of the Earth is as thin as the skin of an apple, and the other is after the narrator characterizes time as "a serpent which eats its tail" and represents the apple offered to Eve by the serpent. When the narrator accosts Trout in the Epilogue, Trout sees an apple in the narrator's hand.
9. There are several dogs in the story. Sparky, Dwayne Hoover's Labrador retriever, cannot wag his tail and so has to fight other dogs all the time. Lancer is the dog whose excrement got on Trout when he was beaten up and left on the handball court, and Kazak is the Doberman pinscher who attempts to attack the narrator in the Epilogue. What do the dogs show us about human nature?
10. What role do birds play in the book? Bill, Kilgore Trout's parakeet, misses his cage when he is freed as he doesn't know what to do with himself. In addition, all the African Americans in Midland City can imitate birds of the British Empire, a skill they learned from Fred T. Barry's mother. What does this skill mean to them?
11. What drives Dwayne Hoover insane? We are told that he has a chemical imbalance and that it is exacerbated by reading Kilgore Trout's novel *Now It Can Be Told*, but are there other causes?
12. When Kilgore Trout realized the ideas in his book have helped drive Dwayne Hoover insane, he says, "Ideas of the lack of them can cause disease!" Are ideas dangerous? How is creativity treated in regard to the population as a whole and the artists in town for the festival?

13. What is the significance of Rabo Karabekian's painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*? The townspeople initially resent it and think its \$50,000 price tag is ridiculous, but he says it "shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out" and represents awareness. Do you believe his explanation? Why are the townspeople so quick to embrace the artwork after hearing what it represents?
14. In describing his painting, Karabekian says all humans are bands of unwavering light. How does this view of humanity differ from or complement the idea of humans as machines? Is it plausible to you? How is it integrated into the story?
15. What does the book have to say about ownership and private property? Dwayne Hoover owns almost all of Midland City, and the unseen Eliot Rosewater is another wealthy individual who has a disproportionate influence on people's lives.
16. What are the narrator's opinions on conservation and development? What natural images are found in the book and what do they represent? What connotations do they have?
17. Does the narrator's obsession with human anatomy complement or contradict the theme of humans as machines? Why does he repeat such measurements?
18. Why does Vonnegut include details of many of the incidental characters' personal stories, whether they are consequential to the plot or not? Is this an attempt to make the novel more like real life, where we often come across random information? Does it help flesh out life in Midland City or is it a distraction?
19. What is the narrator's opinion of America? How does he describe its domestic and foreign policies? What does he think of the government and citizens?
20. What is the relationship between the narrator and Vonnegut himself? Vonnegut has a lot in common with the narrator: for instance, their mothers committed suicide and they are approaching their fiftieth birthdays. To what extent does the narrator represent Vonnegut himself, and to what extent does Vonnegut make him into a character?

Kilgore Trout, a Recurring Character

Kilgore Trout is a recurring character in Vonnegut's works. He is mentioned in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (which tells the story of Eliot Rosewater, the millionaire fan who writes Trout's only fan mail letter in *Breakfast of Champions*), he is featured in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and is the main character of *Timequake*. He is mentioned in *Jailbird*, and his son Leon is the narrator in *Galapagos*.

About the author

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922-2007) is considered one of the most original American writers of the 20 century. In addition to his novels — *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Slapstick* (1976), *Jailbird* (1979), *Deadeye Dick* (1982), *Galapagos* (1985), *Bluebeard* (1987), *Hocus Pocus* (1990), and *Timequake* (1997) — he wrote many plays and short stories.

A 1999 film version of *Breakfast of Champions* stars Bruce Willis as Dwayne Hoover and Albert Finney as Kilgore Trout.