

# "2 B R 0 2 B"

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by Kurt Vonnegut



# Who is Kurt Vonnegut?

- **Kurt Vonnegut**, an American writer, born in 1922, died in 2007. He is noted for his satirical novels in which he frequently used elements of fantasy and science fiction to highlight the horrors and ironies of 20th-century civilization.
- His short stories were concerned with technology and the future, which led some critics to classify Vonnegut as a science fiction writer, though he resisted the label.
- His works generally draw pictures of a completely mechanized and automated society, a society that has dehumanized people.

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## Plot Summary:

This short science fiction story (pronounced "To be or not to be") gives you a glimpse into a world where people **do not age**. It is a satiric short story that imagines life (and death) in a future world where aging has been "cured" and population control is mandated and administered by the government.

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- The title refers to the phone number that people can call to set up their appointment with the gas chambers. Since no one gets any older thanks to new medicines, and to control population growth, an adult must volunteer to die if someone wishes to birth a new baby.

# *Plot summary*

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- The setting is a society in which aging has been cured, individuals have indefinite lifespans, and population control is used to limit the population of the United States to forty million, which is maintained through a government-assisted suicide. In short, for someone to be born, someone must first volunteer to die. As a result, births are few and far between, and deaths occur primarily by accident.

- The scene is a waiting room at the Chicago Lying-In Hospital, where Edward K. Wehling, Jr. is faced with the situation that his wife is about to give birth to triplets, but he has found only one person, his maternal grandfather, who will volunteer to die. A painter on a stepladder is redecorating the room with a mural depicting famous doctors and nurses; particularly, Dr. Benjamin Hitz, the hospital's Chief Obstetrician. Leora Duncan, from the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination, arrives to pose for the mural. It is a picture of a garden that is well taken care of and is a metaphor for the United States at the time. Later, Dr. Hitz enters the scene and converses with everyone but the painter of the mural.

- It becomes apparent to all that Wehling is in a state of despair since he does not want to send his grandfather and two of his children to death. Dr. Hitz questions Wehling's belief in the system and tries to make Wehling feel better by explaining how the surviving child will "live on a happy, roomy, clean, rich planet." Suddenly, Wehling draws a revolver and kills Dr. Hitz, Leora Duncan, and himself, "making room for all three children."

- ❑ The painter, who is about 200 years old, is left to reflect on the scene and thinks about life, war, plague, and starvation. Descending the stepladder, he initially takes the revolver and intends to kill himself with it but is unable to do so. Instead, he calls the Bureau of Termination to make an appointment. The last line is from the receptionist at the Bureau: "Thank you, sir," said the hostess. "Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from all of the future generations."



# Read and Listen.

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# Analysis Themes

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- This story presents a **dystopian future** where the main problem is world overpopulation. As a solution to this problem, the government set up a law that stipulates that for every child born, one person must volunteer to die.

- **Government control** is one of this story themes; the government controls the population by mandating that each new life come at the price of a suicide. Dr. Hitz is a vocal proponent of population control, representing the voice of government reason.
- In the story, Dr. Hitz scolds (reproaches ) Wehling for being miserable about having to choose between his newborn children. Dr. Hitz describes the situation before population control as unsustainable (unmanageable), with no food or water to support the ever-growing population.

# Individuality and Freedom.

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- Dr. Hitz's talk with Wehling suggests a detached, almost bureaucratic understanding of life. He seems entirely unable to understand the impossible choice that Wehling faces, because he sees no individuality, only numbers. Thus, Wehling's suicide is a final expression of his right to control his own fate. By refusing to let his grandfather die, he is implicitly refusing to take part in his society's demands.

# Lack Of Individuality

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- One expression of individuality that has been suppressed and controlled in "2BR02B" is art. The painter is unhappy because he is forced to paint a mural that does not represent life as he understands it. *The Happy Garden of Life* depicts an impossibly formal, well-tended garden that is a metaphor for the world.
- Every body is interchangeable in the painting; in fact, they have already been painted. He merely fills in the blank circles above them with faces, which again evokes the theme of a lack of individuality.

# Questions About the Story

## A. Comprehension Questions:

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1. What ills did the society hope to cure by eliminating unplanned death? Were they successful? What problems did they create?
2. What does Dr. Hitz value and how does he justify his work? With which of his values do you agree or disagree, and why?
3. What ethical considerations are faced by the father of the triplets, Wehling? What choice does he make and why? What should be the consequences of his action, if any?
4. What do you anticipate will be changed by Wehling's action and the death of Dr. Hitz?
5. Why does the painter say his dropcloth is a more accurate picture of the world than his mural? What is the reason for his final choice?

## B. Read and Fill n the balnks.

The main protagonist (character), Edward K. Wehling, Jr. reluctantly sits in the waiting room of a .....(1)..... for his wife, who is giving birth to ....(2)..... Wehling must decide which two of his triplets must die, along with his grandfather, in order to not tip the .....(3).... of world population. So far, the Wehlings have only been able to find only ...(4).... volunteer. Hopelessly, he draws a revolver and shoots ...(5)..... and .....(6)..... Finally, he shoots himself, making ...(7)..... for all three of his children and his grandfather to continue living.

## C. Quiz section.

1. Which character trait applies to Edward Wehling?

- a. He is young.
- c. He is cheerful.

- b. He is playful.
- d. He is bright and colorful.

2. Which is **NOT** one of the ways that the world in the story has changed?

- a. People have stopped aging.
- c. Everybody is happy all of the time.

- b. There is no war or disease.
- d. The American population is capped at 40 million.

3. What does '2 B R 0 2 B' mean in the story?

- a. It is the title of a hit song.
- c. It is the secret password to leave the hospital.

- b. It is the phone number to the gas chambers.
- d. It is the combination to a character's bicycle lock.



4. Which characterization does **NOT** apply to the painter?

- a. He is optimistic.
- b. He is witty.
- c. He is sarcastic.
- d. He is jaded.

5. Which of the following statements about Leora Duncan is **FALSE**?

- a. She has a crush on Dr. Hitz.
- b. She works at the gas chambers.
- c. She has a mustache.
- d. She is afraid to speak up.

6. Which best explains what the author includes the following sentence from the fourth paragraph?

"What man in my shoes wouldn't be happy?"

- a. Confused
- b. Enthused
- c. Sarcastic
- d. Jealous
- e. Naive

7. Which best explains what the author includes the following sentence from the fourth paragraph?

"The painter pondered the mournful puzzle of life"

- a. Simile
- b. Metaphor
- c. Hyperbole
- d. Understatement

8. Why does Dr. Hitz believe in population control?

- a. So everyone can have as many kids as they want
- b. So there are fewer annoying babies in public
- c. So he has job security
- d. So there are enough resources for everyone

9. Which event happens **LAST**?

- a. Mr. Wehling and Dr. Hitz get into an argument.
- b. Leora Duncan reveals her admiration for Dr. Hitz.
- c. The painter makes a phone call.
- d. The orderly sings a popular song under his breath.

10. Which statement is best supported by themes from this text?

- a. War turns allies into friends.
- b. War encourages the creation of new technology.
- c. War makes some people very wealthy.
- d. War is good for controlling the population.

 ***Thank You.***