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2BR02B

By Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

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## Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

- Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born in November 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. His formative years took place during the Great Depression.
- He was an American writer noted for his fantasy, science fiction, and dystopian stories that highlight the horrors and ironies of society.
- At age 20, Vonnegut served the U.S. Army (during WWII) and was shipped off to Europe where he was then captured by the Nazis. Vonnegut and his fellow POWs survived by luck. They were shielded from the bombings in Dresden by happenstance since they were being forced to stay underground in an old meat house.
- His most famous works include: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Player Piano*, *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, *A Man Without a Country*, "2 B R 0 2 B," and "Harrison Bergeron."
- Kurt Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007.



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**barring**

- preposition
- except for

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**sardonic**

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- adjective
- describes cynical or disdainful

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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# obscenity

- noun
- behavior that is offensive or indecent

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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# tribulation

- noun
- a state of great trouble or suffering

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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# formidable

- adjective
- describes someone that inspires fear or respect because of their impressive excellence or power



4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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# immortalize

- verb
- to cause someone to be remembered for a very long time

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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# omnipotent

- adjective
- describes having unlimited power or authority



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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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**keen**

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- adjective
- excellent or wonderful

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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**tautly** PREVIEW

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- adverb
- in a nervous way; emotionally strained or tense

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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**luminously**

- adverb
- in an enlightened or brilliant way

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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**Before Reading “2BR02B”**

**Part A Directions:** Write down the first word that comes to your mind as you read each word below.

**Example:**      **Field**      Baseball

1. Population      \_\_\_\_\_
2. Garden      \_\_\_\_\_
3. Doctors      \_\_\_\_\_
4. Purple      \_\_\_\_\_
5. Termination      \_\_\_\_\_
6. Hospital      \_\_\_\_\_
7. Born      \_\_\_\_\_
8. Blackberry      \_\_\_\_\_

**Part B Directions:** In 2-3 sentences, make a prediction of what this story might be about. Use the words from Part A as your clues.

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**Part C Directions:** Respond to the following journal prompt in a minimum of 8 sentences.

What are the pros and cons of immortality? If you could live forever, would you? Why or why not? If you had to choose one age to live at for the entirety of your life, what age would you choose and why?

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**"2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.**  
**Vocabulary**

Word	Part of Speech	Definition
barring	preposition	
sardonic	Adjective	
obscenity	noun	
tribulation	noun	
formidable	adjective	
immortalize	verb	
omnipotent	adjective	
keen	adjective	
tautly	adverb	
luminously	adverb	

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**“2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.**  
**Reading Questions**

1. How does Vonnegut initially present the setting as a utopian society?

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2. Why does Vonnegut use the word “souls” to describe the population? What is the connotation?

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3. In what way did Edward Wehling blend in with the waiting room?

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4. What was unusual about the scene the muralist was painting?

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5. What does the song the orderly sings foreshadow?

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6. What is the significance of the symbol on the seal of the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination?

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7. Why would a society redecorate a room as a memorial to a man who volunteered to die?

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8. Provide one example of irony in this story. Explain what type of irony it is and the effect.

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9. Explain the metaphor of the drupelet which Dr. Hitz mentions.

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10. What is the point of view of this story? How would this story be different if it were told from the perspective of Edward Wehling?

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11. Who is the main antagonist in this story?

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12. What is a major theme or message of this story?

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13. What is significant about how the operator responds to the painter making an appointment to die?

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14. Do you believe in assisted suicide? Should it be legal? Why or why not?

#### Extended Response Questions

Answer the following questions in a minimum of five complete sentences. Use textual evidence to support your responses.

1. Explain how the garden mural is an allegory for Vonnegut's society. What other metaphors in the story does the mural illuminate (think about the colors and allusions)?

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2. “To be or not to be” is an allusion from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1). The character Hamlet questions “to be or not to be” when he is extremely depressed and fed up with everything in the world around him—he is contemplating putting an end to life and questions if he should live or die. How does the title of “2BR02B” and the connections from *Hamlet* reveal the theme of this story? Why does Vonnegut choose this as the title of this story?

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3. Early in the story, the painter tells the orderly that he won't die at the hands of the Federal Bureau of Termination. Why does he say this? Why does he change his mind? What motivates him to want to commit suicide in the end?

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Name:

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**“2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut Jr**  
**After Reading Project Options**

Option A: Write a police report of the crime scene at the hospital from a detective's perspective. What evidence do you collect? What is the time, place, and nature of the crime? Who are the victims? Suspects? Witnesses? Motives? Weapons? Statements taken? What actions will you take next? Include any other details regarding the investigation.

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|-----------|--|
| 10 points | Your report answers all of the questions listed in the prompt.               |
| 15 Points | Your report is thoughtful, accurate, cohesive, and logical.                  |
| 10 Points | The information in your report is supported with evidence from the story.    |
| 10 Points | Your report is at least one full page in length.                             |
| 5 Points  | You use proper grammar and spelling. You maintain a formal style of writing. |

Total Points: 50 Points

Option B: Illustrate and color a faux “mural” on a regular size piece of blank paper (8.5 x 11). Your mural should represent how you view our society *today*. Your mural should include at least five different symbolic graphic elements that clearly depict the successes and/or downfalls in today's society. Include a creative title, such as “The Happy Garden of Life.”

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| 10 points | Your page is detailed and neat. Images are clear and recognizable.               |
| 10 Points | The overall appearance shows your creativity and it is aesthetically pleasing.   |
| 10 Points | You include a minimum of 5 different illustrations that are colored and a title. |
| 15 Points | You chose illustrations that highlight important parts of today's society.       |
| 5 Points  | You fill the entire page.  |

Total Points: 50 Points

Option C: Create a propaganda pamphlet advertising the Ethical Suicide Studios brought to you by the Federal Bureau of Termination. Consider how your brochure would advertise and/or persuade people to give up their own lives to allow others to be born. Use text and colored images. Include the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers. Include a commendation for those in charge at the Federal Bureau of Termination, such as Dr. Hitz.

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|-----------|---|
| 15 points | Your pamphlet is detailed and neat. Images are clear and text is easy to read.              |
|           | The overall appearance is creative and aesthetically pleasing.                              |
| 10 Points | Your word choice is persuasive, creative, and stay accurate to the story.                   |
| 10 Points | You chose illustrations that highlight important parts of the story.                        |
| 10 Points | You design a complete foldable brochure with 5 pages. All 5 pages are covered with content. |
| 5 Points  | You use proper grammar and spelling.  |

Total Points: 50 Points

## **"2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr— Suggested Lesson Procedure**

1. Assign students the before reading activities "2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut. If you've never read the story before, the title is pronounced "To Be Or Not To Be."
2. Review the vocabulary terms and author's background with students using the Powerpoint presentation. Students should copy the definitions into their graphic organizers. (OR you could direct students to look up the definitions independently.)
3. Read the short story "2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (This takes about 12 minutes without stopping). It's a straightforward text, so you could assign students to read this independently or you can read the text aloud as a whole class.
4. Assign the reading comprehension and extended response questions. Students may complete this independently or in pairs.
5. Review the after reading project options with students. Allow students 1-2 full class periods to work on their projects.

Note to teachers: Due to copyright law, I am unable to offer a full text version of the story. If you enter "2 B R 0 2 B Full Text by Kurt Vonnegut" into any search engine, you will find a copy of the story available for you to print and use in class. Here is the link I used: [Full Text 2 B R 0 2 B](#)

**If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me at**  
[chompingatthelit@gmail.com](mailto:chompingatthelit@gmail.com)

Name:

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**Before Reading “2BR02B”**

**Part A Directions:** Write down the first word that comes to your mind as you read each word below.

**Example:**      **Field**      Baseball

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2. Garden      \_\_\_\_\_
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**Part C Directions:** Respond to the following journal prompt in a minimum of 8 sentences.

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**"2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.**  
**Vocabulary**

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barring	preposition	except for
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formidable	adjective	describes someone that inspires fear or respect because of their impressive excellence or power
immortalize	verb	to cause someone to be remembered for a very long time
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keen	adjective	excellent or wonderful
tautly	adverb	in a nervous way; emotionally strained or tense
luminously	adverb	in an enlightened or brilliant way



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**"2 B R 0 2 B" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.**  
**Reading Questions**

1. How does Vonnegut initially present the setting as a utopian society?

A utopia is an idealized society possessing highly desirable or perfect qualities. Vonnegut does this by saying in the future of the United States, there are no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars and no aging; additionally, all diseases are curable. He states, "Everything was perfectly swell."

2. Why does Vonnegut use the word "souls" to describe the population? What is the connotation?

Vonnegut is highlighting to readers that this fictional future society is much different from the reality of the world today. The word "souls" has a connotation of a more spiritual being as opposed to a regular person. By using the word "souls" instead of "people," the author is implying that humans are viewed differently now that they are practically immortal. In this dystopian society, humans only die by choice or by fatal accidents. Vonnegut also implies that it doesn't matter which forty-million souls are living because they are all interchangeable.

3. In what way did Edward Wehling blend in with the waiting room?

The waiting room had a "disorderly and demoralized air" and Edward was a mess. He was "so still and colorless as to be virtually invisible." Because no one was ever sick anymore and babies were hardly born, the hospital was empty and lifeless—additionally, they were remodeling this particular room. Edward looked broken and demolished like the room because he was consumed in his thoughts. Edward was completely anguished as his wife gave birth to triplets.

4. What was unusual about the scene the muralist was painting?

The story states, "Never, never, never—not even in medieval Holland nor old Japan—had a garden been more formal, been better tended. Every plant had all the loam, light, water, air and nourishment it could use." The garden does not look like a real garden at all. Furthermore, it is supposed to be a depiction of the current society, a society where everyone's needs are so well met, that no one dies naturally anymore. It is unusual because the happiness and neatness of the mural doesn't accurately portray what life is like. The painter hints that life looks more like his drop cloth than the mural he's painting.

5. What does the song the orderly sings foreshadow?

The line, "Let some sweet baby take my place" foreshadows that later in the story somebody has to die for a baby to live. Even popular songs are controlled by the government.

6. What is the significance of the symbol on the seal of the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination?

The symbol is an eagle perched on a turnstile. The eagle is a symbol for the government—a symbol of America—and the turnstile is a form of gate which allows one person to pass at a time. The turnstile represents how people "pass through" a gate to death, in order for another person to enter—just like in this society where people must volunteer to die for babies to live after they are born. The eagle is significant because it shows that the government is on top, in



charge, and while it seems like people have the right to choose, the eagle is actually in complete control.

7. Why would a society redecorate a room as a memorial to a man who volunteered to die?

The man is being honored for giving up his life in a world that is overpopulated. This entices other people to volunteer to end their lives to save humanity. Society is promoting the idea that suicide is an honorable sacrifice that is made to keep the country functioning properly.

8. Provide one example of irony in this story. Explain what type of irony it is and the effect.

Many possible answers.

Example: "All I have to do is pick out which one of the triplets is going to live, then deliver my maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan, and come back here with a receipt." Edward is using verbal irony here as he does not mean what he says. Though it sounds relatively straightforward what needs to be done, it is not simple at all. Edward is distraught while sitting in the waiting room and he expresses his misery and frustration with the system by using sarcasm while speaking to Dr. Hitz.

9. Explain the metaphor of the drupelet which Dr. Hitz mentions.

A drupelet is a tiny knob on a blackberry, and Dr. Hitz compares people in the country to all of the little drupelets. Dr. Hitz mentions this because he believes the world would be overpopulated and overcrowded beyond control like the drupelets on a blackberry if not for the government stepping in. Before the Federal Bureau of Termination, population control was unsustainable, with no food or water to support the ever-growing population. He doesn't want his medical invention of extended lifetimes to seem flawed, so he paints a picture for Edward that population control is beneficial to everyone.

10. What is the point of view of this story? How would this story be different if it were told from the perspective of Edward Wehling?

This story is told from third person point of view. Readers are limited in what they know about Edward's moral dilemma. His decision to kill Dr. Hitz, Leora Duncan, and himself come as a surprise because we don't know what he's thinking throughout the whole story. If the story were told from first person point of view, specifically Edward's perspective, the mood of the story would be more frightening and disturbing as readers await his decision to kill three people.

11. Who is the main antagonist in this story?

The government is the main antagonist in this story because it's the government that controls the population by mandating that each new life come at the price of a suicide. It is the government which runs the Federal Bureau of Termination gas chambers where the suicides take place. While Dr. Hitz is a vocal proponent of population control, he represents the government as a whole.

12. What is a major theme or message of this story?

The survival of the species must be placed above the survival of the individual, and people are expected to make this sacrifice of their own free will. We must sacrifice a life for the life of another. Furthermore, by meddling with human nature and the organic life cycle of humanity (curing aging and all diseases), people have created another crisis on their hands—



overpopulation. This crisis would never have resulted if humans wouldn't have tinkered with the immortality rate of people in the first place.

13. What is significant about how the operator responds to the painter making an appointment to die?

"Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations." This shows a glimpse of the propaganda the government is using to convince people that this system is honorable and successful. By convincing people that committing suicide is a righteous decision, it allows newer generations to be born and exist. This highlights the dystopian characteristics of this short story where the government is hiding the ugly truths of society, propaganda is used to control the citizens of society, and citizens live in a dehumanized state.

14. Do you believe in assisted suicide? Should it be legal? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

### Extended Response Questions

**Answer the following questions in a minimum of five complete sentences. Use textual evidence to support your responses.**

1. Explain how the garden mural is an allegory for Vonnegut's society. What other metaphors in the story does the mural illuminate (think about the colors and allusions)?

Example response:

The mural which the painter is working on, called "the happy garden of life," is intended to be a metaphor for the society in which these characters live. The garden is formal, perfect, and neat—as to promote the idea that all the nation's problems are solved. There are people dressed in either purple or white. "Men and women in white, doctors and nurses, turned the soil, planted seedlings, sprayed bugs, spread fertilizer." "Men and women in purple uniforms pulled up weeds, cut down plants that were old and sickly, raked leaves, carried refuse to trash-burners." The people in white are a metaphor for those with God-like powers because medicine was so advanced in this society that physicians had the ability to prevent/treat aging and all diseases. The people in purple uniforms symbolize the workers of the Ethical Suicide Studios; they prune the garden of the sick and old growth just as they euthanize people who are old and ready to die.

Students might also mention details such as:

This mural is also a metaphor for how individuality and dissent are "bad." The people who are painted in the mural have no faces. "All blanks were to be filled with portraits of important people on either the hospital staff or from the Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Termination."

This metaphor promotes the idea that people are replaceable and those with individual thought are not rewarded.

The mural is a metaphor for medicine's ability to tend to all the necessities of life while Judgment Day is the day of God's final, ultimate judgment on sinful mankind. Purple is a status symbol and represents power or royalty, and the painter even states that the color of the Federal Bureau of Termination uniforms were "the color of grapes on Judgment Day."

The mural not only depicts the society as a whole, but is also alludes to the Garden of Eden—the biblical paradise and archetypal utopia. In the mural, all suffering is removed from society, just as it is in the Garden of Eden.



2. “To be or not to be” is an allusion from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1). The character Hamlet questions “to be or not to be” when he is extremely depressed and fed up with everything in the world around him—he is contemplating putting an end to life and questions if he should live or die. How does the title of “2BR02B” and the connections from *Hamlet* reveal the theme of this story? Why does Vonnegut choose this as the title of this story?

Example response:

“2BR02B” is the title of the story, but it is also the phone number one must dial to reach an assisted suicide institution. The pronunciation is a rephrasing of Hamlet’s iconic question “to be or not to be” which reveals the theme of the story—should you sacrifice one life for the life of another? Hamlet poses his question for all of humanity rather than for only himself as he is curious about the value of life. He begins by asking whether it is better to endure the pain and strife or put an end to the suffering through suicide. The reason this short story is called “2BR02B” is because those who call this number are making the difficult choice of death in order to make room for future generations, and asking themselves is life worth living? While Hamlet used this phrase in a philosophical sense, Vonnegut uses it in a literal sense, which creates a humorous and dramatic effect.

3. Early in the story, the painter tells the orderly that he won’t die at the hands of the Federal Bureau of Termination. Why does he say this? Why does he change his mind? What motivates him to want to commit suicide in the end?

The painter takes the stance of pro-individuality and pro-freedom; he clearly disagrees with the system in place and views it as a government overreach. When complimented on his art work, the painter responds, “You think I’m proud of this daub?” “You think this is my idea of what life really looks like?” The muralist states that he will not die by the government’s hands because death is seemingly the only means of self-expression he has left—he can’t even choose what he paints anymore. He wants to be able to choose how he will die and when he will die to take back his freedom; however, he changes his mind after picking up Edward’s pistol because he is too scared to actually pull the trigger. After witnessing the horrific scene in the waiting room, the painter decides life is not a happy place and he wants to leave. He was already disgusted with how society was functioning and this incident only pushed him over the edge. He knows he will never be able to paint freely again. He will only be able to paint political propaganda and he won’t do it any longer.

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**“2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut Jr**  
**After Reading Project Options**

Option A: Write a police report of the crime scene at the hospital from a detective's perspective. What evidence do you collect? What is the time, place, and nature of the crime? Who are the victims? Suspects? Witnesses? Motives? Weapons? Statements taken? What actions will you take next? Include any other details regarding the investigation.

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| 10 points | Your report answers all of the questions listed in the prompt.               |
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Option C: Create a propaganda pamphlet advertising the Ethical Suicide Studios brought to you by the Federal Bureau of Termination. Consider how your brochure would advertise and/or persuade people to give up their own lives to allow others to be born. Use text and colored images. Include the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers. Include a commendation for those in charge at the Federal Bureau of Termination, such as Dr. Hitz.

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