Slaughterhouse-Five By Kurt Vonnegut Essay, Research Paper

Slaughterhouse-Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was written as a general statement against all wars. Vonnegut focuses on the shock and outrage over the havoc and destruction man is capable of wreaking in the name of what he labels a worthy cause, while learning to understand and accept these horrors and one’s feelings about them. Through his character, Billy Pilgrim, he conveys not only these feelings and emotions, but also the message that we must exercise our free will to alter the unfortunate happenings that might occur in our lives.

Vonnegut had tremendous difficulty writing this novel. He says, “I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (Vonnegut 2). He did not count on his emotions interfering with his attempts at a factual and logical report of such atrocities. It took Vonnegut twenty years to directly face his private demon of the firebombing of Dresden in the form of this novel. He had trouble recalling any memories of substance about his time in Dresden. It could be said that he was blinded by the firebombs of Dresden. It was not until Vonnegut returned to the sight of the bombing twenty years later, along with one of his war buddies, that he was able to recall the disastrous and horrific incidents in Dresden. The novel served as a form of therapy for Vonnegut; it enabled him to examine the events of the past that impacted on his life, and to come to terms with them. Vonnegut chooses to focus the novel on events surrounding the firebombing of Dresden, Germany. As James Lundquist explains:

“The bombing of Dresden was a surprise raid. It wasn’t expected because the city was militarily unimportant. The population of the city had been doubled by prisoners-of-war and refugees. On February thirteenth, 1944, American bombers dropped high-explosive bombs followed by incendiaries, which caused a firestorm that could be seen more than two hundred miles away. On February fourteenth, the Americans carried out a second raid, which completed the destruction of the city. More than two-hundred thousand people were killed outright, burned to death, or died after. Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim were herded with other prisoners-of-war into the storage area of a slaughterhouse and later emerged to find the once beautiful city looking like the surface of the moon” (Lundquist 47).

As Vonnegut reexamines the bombing of Dresden, he relates the event in a way that shows the reader his personal view of the incident. He confronts the Dresden experience with compassion and sorrow rather than anger, bitterness or pain. He sees the madness and cruelty of the world condensed in the blasting of the city. Vonnegut feels special anguish over the bombing because of his situation of being under attack by his own forces and sharing the sufferings of his enemies (Reed 494).

Billy Pilgrim’s character is also greatly affected by the war and by Dresden. Vonnegut tells the story of the bombing with “a day in the life” format. He relays most of the emotionally difficult facts through Billy, the innocent boy thrust into violent and chaotic times. In this manner, Vonnegut does not have to directly confront his own emotions on these issues but can portray his own feelings through the facade of Billy. Vonnegut describes Billy as becoming “unstuck in time” (Vonnegut 23). Billy blurs fact and fiction because he suspects that his vision of reality is hardly reliable. He cannot accept that human nature would allow such an occurrence as Dresden to take place and therefore concludes that his perception of reality must be totally wrong; he sees himself drifting from dream to reality and back again. In this way, he is able to pass off any bad experiences in his life, including Dresden, as a terrible nightmare and not a part of reality. Billy refuses to accept the traditional concept of time (Lundquist 19). Vonnegut also has difficulty accepting the constraints of time and often lives in the past, calling up old girlfriends and remembering the good ol’ days. Vonnegut writes, ” . . . my wife asks me what time it is. She always has to know the time. Sometimes I don’t know, and I say, ‘Search me’” (Vonnegut 7).

After witnessing the war and Dresden, both Billy and Vonnegut try to rationalize and understand what they have been through. Billy does this through his time traveling and visits to the planet Tralfamadore. Billy imagines the planet Tralfamadore where he is whisked off to by aliens. Billy is trying to make sense out of what he has witnessed at Dresden and to give order to the disorder of the universe. He wants life to make sense (Lundquist 17). On Tralfamadore, he is exposed to the Tralfamadorian philosophy on life. Their philosophy states that all time is all time: it does not change. It simply is. All moments exist in time simultaneously and forever, and one cannot change the past or the future because they already and always exist (Lundquist 51-52). Billy learns that the best philosophy is to enjoy the good moments and ignore the bad ones.

The Tralfamadorians do not understand Billy’s concern about finding a cure for the wars on Earth that result in the bombing of Dresden. They know that it is all inevitable and unchangeable. Free Will is a uniquely human concept. The Tralfamadorians know that it does not truly exist. Billy’s trip to Tralfamadore allows him to examine the human race as a whole from afar. Billy comes to adopt Tralfamadorian philosophy. He continues on his time-travels and manages to rescue himself and his personal sanity through the works of his own imagination. His time-travels and trips to Tralfamadore serve as a rationalizing fantasy. He reinvents himself and his universe so that he can go on living. He is unhinged by what happens to him in the war, and because of this, he invents the Tralfamadorians. He blames his madness on them and make his time-travels agree with their version of reality.

Vonnegut also tries to rationalize and come to terms with the horrors to which he has been a witness. He, like Billy, is torn between the desire to forget Dresden and his obsession with finding a way to reconcile the human suffering he observed there. In an introduction to the novel, Vonnegut makes a comparison of the burning of Dresden to the Biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He describes a scene where he looks through a Gideon Bible in his motel room for tales of great destruction and he comes to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“God rained fire and brimstone on the two cities: Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt . . . People aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore . . This [novel] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt” (Vonnegut 21-22).

Vonnegut claims that he, too, was turned into a pillar of salt looking back at Dresden, because of his mistake of trying to account for what had happened. He, as a participant, can never gain the cosmic view that would enable him to understand. Nonetheless, Vonnegut tries to find order and logic in what he has experienced. On his revisiting of Dresden, a cab driver who took him back to the slaughterhouse relays holiday wishes to Vonnegut “. . . to meet again in a world of peace . . . if the accident will” (Vonnegut 2). Vonnegut would like to find significance in what happened in Dresden, but after all, it all comes down to a series of accidents (Lundquist 49).

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut follows all accounts of tragic events with “So it goes.” Whether Vonnegut writes about Dresden schoolgirls boiled alive in a water tower, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the Vietnam War, all are followed by the phrase “So it goes” (Vonnegut 210). In accordance with Tralfamadorian philosophy, Vonnegut tries to gloss over unpleasant times and concentrate on good ones. This is part of the reason why he had so much difficulty recalling events of significance that could be put into his novel. He chose to forget the unpleasant events of the war and could only remember humorous anecdotes. He explains his experiences by making light of them. The novel cannot help but draw the attention of the reader to the underlying theme of man’s cruelty. Vonnegut writes:

“I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby…The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he’s given a regular trial, and then he’s shot by a firing squad” (4-5).

Vonnegut finds it very difficult to understand how a world can exist where a massacre of human life can go unpunished, while the same world will find a man guilty and deserving of death for plundering a mere teapot.

The second title of the novel indicates Vonnegut’s purpose for his writing. He intended Slaughterhouse-Five to be an anti-war novel. The title “The Children’s Crusade” reveals Vonnegut’s feeling that all wars are fought by the young-usually for causes that they are incapable of comprehending. Vonnegut commented on how most of the men involved in the war were “little more than children, foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (14). He writes this novel so that war does not look wonderful, and so we do not have many more of them, and they will not be fought by babies such as they were back in Dresden (Vonnegut 15).

Throughout the course of the novel, Vonnegut attempts to adopt the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life that would make it painless for him to describe the firebombing of Dresden and Billy’s suffering in a cold, detached, objective manner. In the final chapter of the novel, Vonnegut speculates on whether or not he can accept such a view of life. Vonnegut comments, “If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, [that events in time exist simultaneously and forever], I am not overjoyed. Still- if I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I’m grateful that so many of those moments are nice” (211).

Vonnegut is being totally sarcastic as he has just completed writing about one of the worst events in his life-the bombing of Dresden. If we live forever, so too will the firebombing of Dresden go on forever.

Ultimately, Vonnegut does not agree that his and Billy’s attempts to forget the terrible moments in their lives are the correct way to face what they have been through. Vonnegut knows that he cannot avoid events in his life simply because they are disagreeable to him; yet he still does not say whether or not people can control life or if, as the Tralfamadorians believe, there is no such thing as free will. Vonnegut debates this concept from the outset of the novel when he tells a friend that he is writing an anti-war book. Vonnegut toys with the notion that war is inevitable, but he leaves the possibility that wars can be stopped; he still knows that death is unavoidable.

Vonnegut ultimately rejects the Tralfamadorian theory of life that is so common throughout the novel. He knows that he will never understand man’s cruelty, but he does know that it is not inevitable; he knows that it can be stopped. He knows that one day the world will stop sending its babies off to fight and that constant war is not the fate of the universe. A prayer in the novel that is stated both in Billy’s Tralfamadorian world, as well as in his real world, goes as follows:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference” (60, 209).

This prayer summarizes Vonnegut’s message to his readers. Parts of life are inevitable and must be accepted, but many parts of life can and must be changed. As human beings, we do have free will. We have control of our lives and what we want to make of them. We must learn to see what is beyond our abilities to change and also what we must have the strength and perseverance to alter.

34f