Slaughterhouse Five Essay, Research Paper

Slaughterhouse Five

Kurt Vonnegut

Critics of Kurt Vonnegut s are unable to agree on what the main theme of his novel Slaughterhouse Five may be. Although Vonnegut s novels are satirical, ironical, and extremely wise, they have almost no plot structure, so it is hard to find a constant theme. From the many people that the main character Billy Pilgrim meets, and the places that he takes us, readers are able to discern that Vonnegut is trying to send the message that there will always be death, there will always be war, and humans have no control over their own lives.

Most of the book is the narrative from Billy Pilgrim a unique character who has the ability to become unstuck in time , which means that he can uncontrollably drift from one part of his life to another and the trips aren t nessicarilly fun . The whole books is organized in the same way Billy moves in time. In consists of numerous sections and paragraphs strung together in no chronological order, seemingly at random. The whole narration is written in the past tense, so that the reader cannot identify where the author s starting point is. This aspect of the book is almost identical with the Tralfamadorian type of book:

There isn t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that,when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and suprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.

I agree with Mark Vit when he says that the most often expressed theme of the book is that we, as people, are bugs in amber . The phrase first appears when Billy is kidnapped by the Tralfamacorian flying saucer:

Welcome aboard, Mr. Pilgrim. said the loudspeaker. Any questions,?

Billy licked his lips, thought a while, inquired at least: Why me?

That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?

Yes. Billy, in fact, had a paperweight in his office which was a blob of polished amber with three lady bugs embedded in it.

Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why.

Vit interprets the passage as humans being physically stuck in this world, that we don t have any choice over what we, mankind as a whole, do and what we head for. The only thing we can do is think about everything, but we won t affect anything. This idea appears many times throughout the novel. This is one of the examples, when Billy proposes marriage to Valencia:

Billy didn t want to marry ugly Valencia. She was one of the symptoms of his disease. He knew he was going crazy when he heard himself proposing marriage to her, when he begged her so take the diamond ring and be his companion for life.

This excerpt directly shows that Billy didn t like Valencia very much and that he actually didn t want to marry her. However, he was stuck in amber . Or, for example, Billy knew the exact time when he would be killed, yet didn’t try to do anything about it. He couldn t have changed it anyway.

Wayne Thompson thinks that Slaughterhouse Five was to show meaning in the absurd. The events in Dresden really are really only the outer layer, hiding a deeper meaning. In the books first chapter, Vonnegut shares a conversation that happened when he informed a friend that he was writing a book about the war:

Is it an antiwar book?

Yes I said. I guess

You know what i say to people when I hear that they are writing an anti-war book?…I say why don t you write an anti glacier book instead?

What he meant was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers…and that even if wars didn t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death.

Thompson cites this passage as being critical to understanding the novel. Yes, war is terrible because innocents die for no good reason. Yes, it s a shame that Edgar Derby was executed for swiping a teapot. But people die everyday, and they will continue to die, no matter how many anti-war novels are written; besides, is there really a good reason to die? Our existence is finite;death is the only constant. Most people only contemplate this after one of two things has happened. They re either old and close to death, or they have witnessed something terrible, like massive senseless death.

After Billy visits Tralfamidore, he seems to fully accept the absurdity of life. He believes that existence is not finite, that we exist in all times, for all time and, given that, there is no reason to fear death. His purpose is to exist, and that is all he has ever done and will ever do. Existence is a Sisyphean tank, an infinite recycling of things already done.

Thompson believes that the books meaning lies deeper than the fact that war is bad. Pilgrim refuses to accept the idea that there are absurd things in life, because if death can be so senseless then what does that say about life itself? The absurd life is essentially one without meaning and that often ends with a ridiculous death. The firebombing of Dresden, the absurd execution of Edgar Derby, the war itself are all really just means to an end. Billy watches as 100,000 lives are snuffed out, and he cannot help but wonder why? Ultimately, he cannot answer that question, because there is no answer. There is no reason why. This ties back in with what the Tralfamidorians taught Billy about death and war.

Billy learned many important lessons from the Tralfamidorians. They told him that there will always be wars on Earth, that we, people, are designed that way. There might be people striving for eternal peace, but those people must be very naive and probably don t know humankind s nature. We know that wars are bad and we would like to stop them, but we can t because we are merely stuck in amber .

The Tralfamadorinas tell Billy is how Earth is unlike any other planet is its superficial limits of time and it s human beings belief in free will. The Tralfamadorians say:

All time is time. It does not change. It does nt lend itself to warnings or explantions;. It simply is Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all…bugs in amber…If I hadn t spent so much time studying Earthling, I wouldn t have any idea what is meant by free will. I ve studied many inhabited planets in the universe…Only on earth is their talk of free will.

With this statement, critic James Lembourg thinks that Vonnegut is trying to say that he doesn t believe in free will. Vonnegut describes time, life and the war as unexplainable. The Tralfamadorieans tell Billy that although earth is corrupt, humans can do nothing about it. There are no villains in Slaughterhouse Five, no one to take the blame. That means that the only villain can be God Himself, or Herself, of Itself, or whatever . God Almighty had to be the one who put us into the amber, who had created us the way we are. In Slaughterhouse s first chapter Vonnegut confesses:

There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces.

So even though humans go about their business thinking that they have a free will, Vonnegut preaches that God has absolute control over our lives and their is nothing to be done about it.

This brings up another theme of the novel, identified again by Mark Vit. Death is inevitable and that no matter who dies, life still goes on. The phrase so it goes recurred 106 times: it appears every time anybody dies in the novel,and sustains the circular quality of the book. It enable the book, and Vonnegut s narration to go on. It must have been hard writing a book about death through the eyes of a Tralfamadorinan:

When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is so it goes .

Because of passages like this, many people are able to draw inferences to an almost spiritual quality in the book. The ideas that the Tralfamadorians hold defiantly point to predestination and maybe even a type of eternal life.

So what was Vonnegut trying to say to us? That it does not matter what we do in our lives because they will end up the say way regardless? Several people have read the book and come away with that message.

Regardless of Vonnegut s intent, his final product was a book about the absurdity of war and death. Someone may live a noble life or be a war hero, but in the end, they will die, and the war will go on. It is futile to try and change the cycle.

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