Slaughterhouse Five Essay, Research Paper

Slaughterhouse-Five

Critics often suggest that Kurt Vonnegut s novels represent a man s desperate, yet, futile search for meaning in a senseless existence. Vonnegut s novel, Slaughterhouse-Five, displays this theme. Kurt Vonnegut uses a narrator, which is different from the main character. He uses this technique for several reasons.

Kurt Vonnegut introduces Slaughterhouse Five in the first person. In the second chapter, however, this narrator changes to a mere bystander. Vonnegut does this for a specific reason. He wants the reader to realize that the narrator and Billy Pilgrim, the main character, are two different people. In order to do this, Vonnegut places the narrator in the text, on several occasions. An American near Billy wailed that [Billy] had excreted everything but his brains…That was I. That was me. This statement clearly illustrates that the narrator and Billy are not the same person. The narrator was the

American disgusted by Billy. Vonnegut places the narrator in the novel in subtle ways. While describing the German prisoner trains, he merely states, I was there. By not referring to Billy as I, Billy is immediately an individual person. I is the narrator, while Billy is Billy. Their single connection is that they were both in the war.

Kurt Vonnegut places his experiences and his views in the text. He begins the book by stating, All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true…I ve changed all of the names. Viewing war as a senseless act, Slaughterhouse-Five allows Vonnegut to express his feelings on the matter. Through Billy Pilgrim, he is able to indicate his views. Many things which he viewed as senseless acts were very violent. [The two scouts] had been lying in ambush for the Germans. They had been discovered and shot from behind. Now they were dying in the snow, feeling nothing, turning the snow the color of raspberry sherbet. So it goes. The narrator describes what happened and how it occurred. The imagery is very strong. The reader can imagine the snow slowly being dyed with the color of blood. Therefore, readers can picture a slow agonizing death. By ending with the statement, So it goes, the reader is enticed. The narrator states this when he finds that there is no need to continue describing the horrific brutality. The imagery used in the preceding sentence was strong enough.

Kurt Vonnegut does not want to glorify war. The narrator made a vow to

O Hare s wife, in chapter one, that the story would not do this. …I give my word of honor. I ll call it the children s crusade. In order to do this, Vonnegut makes the main character a simple man. His name is Billy Pilgrim. His mission is to avoid anything that requires action or responsibility. This causes him to avoid finding meaning in his life; he regards the world as chaotic. The senseless act of war causes Billy to begin his search. Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. Time traveling symbolizes Billy s search for meaning. When an event is too difficult for him to handle, he travels in order to escape his fears. In chapter five, he is not only abducted by aliens, but he is also a prisoner of war. The two transpired at different times, but there is an obvious connection between the two. In both cases, he is taken against his will. Since being captured by aliens is only a fantasy, it makes the fact that he was abducted by the Germans only more traumatizing. Time traveling hurts Billy. He always avoids his fears, and never confronts them. His fantasy life causes his real life to be more terrifying. Billy s will was paralyzed by a zap gun. He was hauled into an airlock. At this point, Billy had been captured by the denizens of Tralfamadore. This experienced can be related to the

Germans capturing him, during the war. Billy Pilgrim was packed into a boxcar with many other privates…Germans were securing the hasps on the car doors. In both cases, he is a person taken against his will. The Tralfamadore experience was peaceful. He knew it was going to take place, and therefore, he could handle it with ease. On the other hand, when the Germans captured him, he was not ready for it. When this unexpected occurred, he was terrified. His fantasy had made the real experience only worse.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy Pilgrim does find meaning. This occurs, when he is abducted by the Tralfamadores. The aliens tell him that there is no such thing as free will. All time is all time. It does not change….Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I ve said before, bugs in amber. As the alien stated this, Billy felt inspired because now he knew that things were beyond his control. He could not change the past or the future. With this information, Billy begins to learn about the future. I,

Billy Pilgrim will die, have died, and will always die on February thirteenth, 1976. Billy is in fact right with this prediction. Realizing everything is planned out, Billy ends his search for meaning. He understands that he can do nothing to stop the senseless acts, which take place. Like the Tralfamadores, he must try to concentrate on the good moments and not on the bad ones. He could do nothing to stop them or to change them.

Kurt Vonnegut s Slaughterhouse-Five suggests that a man can not change his fate. Any attempts to change the past or the future are meaningless. Therefore, there is nothing to search for, and the search for meaning is futile.