

English 102 – Long Research Paper

Kurt Vonnegut's Prevalent Themes in *Slaughterhouse Five*

In the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade* by Kurt Vonnegut, the story of Billy Pilgrim is used to explore various themes about life and war. Vonnegut's tragic war experiences in Dresden led him to write on the horrors and tragedies of war. Vonnegut's connection with Billy and the other characters allows him to discuss human reactions to death and traumatic events. Vonnegut uses his characters, in particular Billy Pilgrim, to portray his beliefs. An antiwar feeling, shown through numerous characters, dominates the entire novel from the opening to the closing. Vonnegut also brings to question the ideas of free will and predestination. Billy has a deep belief in predestination and quietism, but Vonnegut disagrees with these views and ideals. Vonnegut uses Billy as an example of the possible dangers of believing in predestination and quietism.

Vonnegut's antiwar feelings create a major theme that emerges from *Slaughterhouse Five*. While talking to O'Hare in the opening chapter of the novel, Vonnegut says "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). And as Cox explains, the novel is "not an answer to the tragedy of war, but a response" (3). Vonnegut uses the characters he creates to express his reaction to the war.

Billy Pilgrim is used to show the terrible consequences of war. Billy's time in the war greatly affected him and his outlook on the world. From his imprisonment Billy has come to feel that nothing constructive comes from war. He believes that ". . . war is not a heroic contest between the forces of good and evil but a senseless slaughter with many victims and no villains" (Marvin 113). When Billy comes home from the war, he does not often speak about what he saw or how he felt. He tries to distance himself from the war as much as possible. Billy uses the rest of his life as an escape from the war just as he tried to use death as an escape from the war when he first arrived in the Battle of the Bulge. When Weary tries to rescue him, Billy responds with little care for his life saying, "You guys go on without me. I'm all right" (Vonnegut 47). Billy shows no care for saving his own life. Vonnegut uses "Billy's innocence and passivity to help Vonnegut [to] focus the reader's attention on the brutality of war (Marvin 124). Vonnegut appeals to the readers, attempting to make them feel empathy for Billy. The reader sees the sad figure of Billy Pilgrim suffering through a war he believes is pointless and the reader begins to see the horrors of war that Billy is feeling.

Vonnegut also uses other characters to portray his antiwar theme. Marvin says that "He [Edgar Derby] is the most admirable character in the book, which makes his senseless death all the more lamentable" (126). Vonnegut uses Derby's death to compound the reader's feeling that war is pointless. Derby was a forty-four year old teacher with a wife at home, and his only crime was taking a teapot. But, for this simple act he loses his life after surviving the entire war, a prisoner of war camp, and the firebombing of Dresden.

Another character used by Vonnegut is Roland Weary. Weary is eager to wage war against the Nazis. Weary's passion for war "is the prime example of how stories that glorify war shape the attitudes of young boys and make them eager to fight" (Marvin 125). Vonnegut's novel is the opposition to the stories that make war

seem great. *Slaughterhouse Five* shows what can happen to the zealous boy ready to fight for his country. He can die as Weary did of gangrene on a train car overflowing with soldiers on his way to a prisoner of war camp.

The most blatant antiwar discussion in the novel occurs in the opening between Vonnegut and Mary O'Hare. She fears that the book will glorify war as so many books and movies have in the past. She fears that the book will portray the "babies" fighting in the war as grown men, and these babies will be played by "war-loving, dirty old men" (14). Vonnegut assures Mary that the novel will show the savageness and horror of war. He even promises, "I'll call it 'The Children's Crusade'" (15). This scene sets the antiwar tone from chapter one.

Vonnegut uses his characters to express his antiwar feelings. He cannot express his feelings on the war and the Dresden firebombing directly because he believes "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). In the end "the conclusion Vonnegut comes to after examining the causes and effects of Dresden is that there indeed is no moral, only the *Poo-tee-weet* of the bird call" (Lundquist 45). "Poo-tee-weet" (Vonnegut 215) is the only rational thought on a war Vonnegut can find. He cannot explain or even comment on the death and destruction he has seen in Dresden. This strengthens the idea that war can have terrible consequences even on those who survive the war physically and return home as Vonnegut and even Billy Pilgrim do.

Billy finds his own explanation of the bombing and the death of so many innocent people. He turns to the Tralfamadorian belief that the deaths were unpreventable and had to happen because that was how they were supposed to happen. Neither he nor anyone else could change what destiny had decided would occur. At the thought of these deaths and all death Billy sees, he has only one reaction, "so it goes" (Vonnegut 96).

This phrase is cited at any mention of death in Billy's death. Marvin believes "while it is true that the novel adopts the Tralfamadorian custom of saying 'so it goes' every time a death occurs, this relentless repetition shows that the fatalistic attitude behind the saying is ridiculous" (128). Vonnegut uses Billy as an example of how humans should not react to war. Billy speaks of death as if it were casual and it had not real consequences, but in reality death causes extraordinary pain and suffering on a daily basis. Vonnegut uses this contradiction to show the reader that "death is inevitable, but some deaths are preventable, and the novel consistently demonstrates that human beings have the power to shape the present and the future" (Marvin 128).

The question of free will and the inevitability of one's life becomes a second major theme in the novel. On his trip to Tralfamador, Billy learns from the inhabitants that he has no control over what happens to him in the future. He cannot change the events of his life because it was preordained long before he was born. In a sense "the moment always exists" (Tanner 128). The Tralfamadorians discussed the idea of "free will" (Vonnegut 86) with Billy. They know that free will is not a reality in their world and say that Earth is the only place where people believe in "free will" (Vonnegut 86). Billy cannot fully grasp this concept because he lives in only three dimensions while the Tralfamadorians can see into the fourth dimension of time. They can see all of time at once, including the future, and they realize that it is impossible to change destiny because it has already been set. Billy becomes jaded by this idea and spends the rest of his life without care for anything that happens in his life. Nothing shocks Billy because he believes that it had to happen. He does not feel sorry because there is nothing he nor anyone could have done to stop it. The idea that no one can control his or her future leads to two reactions.

One person may find it a challenge and try to change his or her life. The majority, however, will do as Billy does and spend the rest of their lives “simply ‘unenthusiastic’ about living” (Tanner 129).

Billy’s uncaring attitude is shown numerous times throughout the novel. In the opening Billy does not care about saving himself from certain death in the snow covered forests. Roland Weary must stay behind to keep pushing Billy along. On the plane to the optometrist convention, Billy knows they are about to crash but does not care about all the lives that will be lost when the plane goes down. As Billy emerges from the slaughterhouse for the first time, he sees that “everybody else in the neighborhood was dead. So it goes” (Vonnegut 178). Billy does not feel any sadness or remorse for the thousands of people who were just firebombed to death. In the final chapter when Billy’s closest companion from the war, Edgar Derby, dies, Billy reacts without apparent care and simply says, “so it goes” (Vonnegut 214).

Billy seems unconcerned with life at each of these traumatic events. Robert Merrill believes that “Vonnegut is concerned with the problem of quietism, a philosophy rooted in the common conviction that modern life is beyond the influence of responsible individuals” (177). Billy has a passionate belief in quietism that keeps him from caring about the events in his life. Through the life of Billy Pilgrim “. . . Vonnegut wants us to see the terrible consequences of giving into such beliefs [quietism]” (Merrill 178). Vonnegut is not advocating a belief in quietism, but rather is using the story of Billy to explain the problem of being unconcerned with the events in one’s life.

Vonnegut uses the character of Billy Pilgrim to show the reason people should not react to tragic situations as Billy does. Vonnegut is using the poignant story of Billy as an example of what can happen when a person feels that life has no meaning and one has no control over one’s destiny. Tanner asserts that the “whole work suggests. . .if man doesn’t do something about the conditions and quality of human life on earth, no one and nothing else will” (130). If people feel that they cannot work harder to get further, then their passion to improve themselves and society will fall apart. Harris believes that if you “strip purpose from the cosmos. . .man’s confidence collapses” (131). This idea of a purposeful universe does not have to be true at all, but as long as people see “the illusion of a purposeful universe” (Harris 131), then they will continue as though it were true.

The moral presented by Vonnegut agrees that some things are out of man’s control, but there are also things that man can change. Vonnegut wants the reader to realize “that it would be nice to possess the courage to change the things we can” (Harris 137), but this is only half of the moral. Vonnegut also shows that man should not worry about the things he cannot change. He believes that when life presents an obstacle that cannot be changed, then man should respond with “resigned acceptance” (Harris 137). From his experiences in the war Vonnegut has learned that death is something that he cannot stop. He has realized that “even if wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would be plain old death” (Vonnegut 4).

On the wall in Billy’s office hangs the prayer “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” (Vonnegut 60). This is the message about man’s purpose and destiny that Vonnegut is trying to portray in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Billy is the delusional result of believing too many things are out of his grasp to change. He believes that “among the things

[he] could not change were the past, present, and the future” (Vonnegut 60). Billy definitely has the ability to recognize what he cannot change and may even have the power to change the things that he can correct, but he is lacking the judgment to perceive the difference between the two. Vonnegut uses this weakness in Billy to show what can happen when a man believes the entire world is out of his hands, and he can change nothing in his life.

When Billy gained his newfound belief that he could not change destiny, his life lost all of its meaning. If Vonnegut were trying to support the idea of quietism, then the life of Billy would have become better after his enlightenment. Instead, Billy becomes “. . .not merely ‘unstuck in time’ but rather just plain crazy” (Lupack 108). This shows that Vonnegut wants to emphasize the consequences of quietism. He is using Billy as an example of how one should not live one’s life.

The life of Billy Pilgrim raises the question, “What is the purpose of life?” (McGinnis 55). Billy believes that life has no purpose, and he is forced to live as destiny has decided he should. Through the weakness and despair in Billy it can be seen that the answer to the question is “man must arbitrarily make his own purpose” (McGinnis 55). People are not born with a purpose in life as Billy believes, but one must search to find the purpose for one’s life. Billy believes he did not need to find a purpose because it would just come to him through his predetermined fate.

Through the novel Vonnegut expresses his anti-war opinions. He uses the characters in the novel to show the effects war can have on many different types of people. In each case the result is tragic. Both Roland Weary and Edgar Derby die in the war while all the death Billy has seen leaves him jaded and dead inside. As Vonnegut promised Mary O’Hare, the book does not glorify war but shows the tragedies and sorrow that result from it. The book is not a novel about men who enjoy war and want to glorify it; as Vonnegut promised, “there won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne” (15). Vonnegut’s other main themes in *Slaughterhouse Five* are the reality of free will and the concept of predestination. He uses the actions and thoughts of the characters in his story to develop both ideas. Billy Pilgrim is most often the character used to show Vonnegut’s opinions. He is used as an example of a man living opposite of Vonnegut’s views. Billy feels that his life was outlined before he was even born and he has no free will to change his life as he wishes. This causes him to feel his life has no purpose. Vonnegut uses the sad life of Billy to show the consequences of quietism. He wants readers to see that they can change their world and their future alike.

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