



Thematic Essay

Themes In Slaughterhouse-Five By Kurt Vonnegut

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) is a satirical novel that was written by Kurt Vonnegut on events of the Second World War. It contains journeys and experiences during the time of Billy Pilgrim, from his serving as an American soldier and chaplain's assistant as well as postwar and early years. This novel is considered the best popular and influential work that Vonnegut did (Vonnegut 1-95). The central event of the novel is when Pilgrim survived the firebombing of Dresden by the Allies. This was Vonnegut's personal experience; this is why the novel could be argued to be semi-autobiographical. He also developed his story and the events and experiences of the World War II through various themes. This essay highlights some of the central themes in the novel.

One such theme is happiness and time. Slaughterhouse-Five is a tale of Billy's search for happiness (Rolfe 75). He eventually realizes that he can only achieve happiness if he lets go of past fears. Despite the fact only the chronology of the war years is presented, Billy has a taste of both peace and war in equal measures. Additionally, his travelling through time in his epiphany in the woods is described by Tralfamadorians as a capture in time "like a bug in amber" (Kern 161). According to human nature, he enjoys the nap that he takes while at the back of the wagon that is drawn by horses and surrounded by the ruins of Dresden. The clause "like a bug in amber" implies that this was one of his happiest moments. It also shows that one key hint to happiness is accepting each moment and embracing the events surrounding it.

Another theme that Vonnegut uses to develop his story is free will. During their conversation, Billy tells the guide that the aliens sound like they do not believe in freewill. In response, the alien claims that of all the planets, it only on earth that the concept of freewill exists (Elaheh et al. 8). In this case, this novel implies that

freewill is a notion that humans create in their minds and it could be meaningless when applied in another context. Billy is also advised by the aliens that instead of focusing on the bad times he has had, he should focus on the good moments he has had in his life. Such sentiments are supported by the prayer that is found in Billy's office and between the breasts of Montana Wildhacks (Brown 101-109). The view of the alien could be interpreted to mean that one can only exist if they choose not to change their present, past, or future. Similarly, Vonnegut suggests that this is what freewill entails; one has the opportunity to change their past, present, and future, or choose not to change any of them.

Vonnegut also uses the themes of death and human dignity to create and develop his story. He also uses these themes to show the experiences that people faced during the Second World War. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, death is not considered a tragic event (Yang 40). Additionally, all people and things are considered equal, and so are their death; none is considered more tragic or important than the other. For instance, the death of Martin Luther King as one of the characters, the microbes found in Billy's jacket, or Vonnegut's own biological father, the Tralfamadorian mantra "that accompanies the event is "So it goes." This implies that little attention is attached to death, regardless of who dies. It is also notable that any case of death in the novel is not accompanied by any form of blame or sadness (Yang 40). Simply put, death is considered inevitable and thus embraced regardless of what caused it. Billy also experiences moments of prediction of his own death as he travels but this does not scare him a bit. He considers death a soothing hum and a purple light. This could be interpreted to mean that there are larger experiences in life that are more worrying and scaring than death. However, Vonnegut seeks to show that human life is precious by developing the theme of human dignity (Coleman 681-698). He does not consider war as either glamorous or heroic; in his view, it is disgusting, messy, and a 'robber' of human dignity. This raises the issue of human dignity again in Vonnegut's narrative, as he shows how easy it is for some people to deny others human dignity (Coleman 681-698). However, Vonnegut questions some of the conceptions held

about dignity; he claims that they are only used in the creation of war narratives that mislead masses by making war sound and look heroic.

Kurt Vonnegut uses these, among others, themes to develop his story of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*. These themes successful tell of Pilgrim as a man ‘unstuck’ in time. The themes also show some of the experiences that people went through during the Second World War, as well as the view of the society to some of issues such as death and human dignity. This shows the importance of the themes to the development and understandability of Vonnegut’s story.

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