

Humanism in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughter House – Five

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Abstract

There are many science-fiction writers in English literature and Vonnegut is a quiet interesting writer with lot of scientific thoughts but he strongly denies to be called as a Science fiction writer. In his writings strong anti-war sentiments are expressed and conveys anti-war beliefs. Strangely enough, Slaughterhouse-Five along with much of his other writings are strongly non-sentimental in order to convey these anti-war beliefs. While sentimentality and emotional appeal are typical approaches to rhetorical arguments, Vonnegut often disregards sentiment in favor of reductive reasoning in favor of a moral point he is trying to make. This paper explores at showing Vonnegut has Humanistic approach in his writing.

Keywords: Anti-war, Humanism and Peace.

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five is essentially an anti-war book. The historical context of this book centers around the bombing of Dresden on the nights of Feb. 13 and 14 in 1944 during World War II. Hundreds and thousands were killed at locations like Dresden, which were non-military in nature but served as methods of weakening Axis morale. Vonnegut himself was present at Dresden when it was bombed. This book is his way of releasing emotional turmoil caused by war. Slaughterhouse-Five, much like other Vonnegut books, shows his strong disgust of war and the ironies of contemporary society in attempting in vain to answer the question "Why war?"

An article from The English Journal 1974, an educator Rita Bornstein cites several objectives for a war-peace studies course, including "to examine and evaluate traditional and human values and beliefs concerning war and peace" and "to analyze and react to war literature and discuss the role of literature in meliorating human problems". Her actual goal for the course is to study the melioration of war. As a goal for a classroom setting, this one is certainly unique, ambitious, and inspiring. However, textbooks for this kind of study were largely non-existent in 1974, and still are in 2008. Hence, Bornstien and other educators have turned to literature as a source for anti-war curricula. One might question the efficacy of fiction to actually achieve the task of "meliorating human problems," that is literally to prevent the deaths of soldiers, but this paper will explore how one writer employed his rhetorical prowess in an attempt to sabotage war through the means of writing stories—powerful ones.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is famous for breaking conventions in his novel, Slaughterhouse-Five, but the novel is also fairly well known, along with other examples of Vonnegut's prolific prose, for handling war issues. Vonnegut himself fought in World War II, and earned a purple heart, but was later known as a pacifist. However, Vonnegut, a man who resisted labels, cannot be pigeonholed so easily. Slaughterhouse-Five certainly carries its own fair share of anti-war rhetoric, but it also insightfully deals with all of the problematic complexities of both pro and anti-war stances. I say "insightfully" because

it seems-and I believe that Vonnegut would see this as well-that any extremist perspective ultimately leads to fallibility, and ultimately leads to a kind of war-involving a battle of different opinions. Vonnegut tackles these issues in the novel Slaughterhouse-Five as well as in his later writings, and in his own particular way his style seemed, and still seems, to influence people, possibly even more than some anti-war marches may have.

When Vonnegut began writing Slaughterhouse-Five, I'm not sure whether or not he imagined that he would continue commenting upon wars until he died in 2007. One of his many time-honoring obituaries notes that "Dresden was the basis for "Slaughterhouse-Five," (sic) published in 1969 against the backdrop of war in Vietnam, racial unrest and cultural and social upheaval" (Robinson). However, it is the essentially self-conscious way in which Vonnegut handles war issues that makes this particular text of his, along with so many of his other writings, so enduring. In a late interview with an online magazine called McSweeney's, Vonnegut insightfully says, "Well, the telling of jokes is an art of its own, and it always rises from some emotional threat. The best jokes are dangerous, and dangerous because they are in some way truthful" (Rentilly "Part Three"). Indeed, Slaughterhouse-Five did become a dangerous joke-the kind that challenges the beliefs of a generation, it challenged the worldviews of the individuals involved in the Vietnam War, which in 1969 was the entire United States.

The very subtitle of the work, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death, is a subversion of war mongering philosophy. Vonnegut upends the term "crusade," which refers to the holy wars where children were sacrificed during the 13th century famously conducted "in the name of the church." Interestingly, Vonnegut's own crusade against war is secular, sarcastic, and surprisingly sane. Still, it is strange to attempt to use a book to stop a war-it certainly breaks the old code of "art for art's sake" and-if stopping wars is indeed Vonnegut's aim at all-upholds the old adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword." According to one critic who writes about Vonnegut's involvement in this market of anti-war literature, "A very bad business called Vietnam continues to be very good business in

mass market fiction” (Beidler 64). This same critic then goes on to compare three books set in Vietnam, one by Danielle Steele, the sickeningly successful Romance novel writer, and one of which Vonnegut wrote, called *Hocus Pocus*. One great anti-war comment that Vonnegut makes in *Hocus Pocus* is when he says, “During my three years in Vietnam, I certainly heard plenty of last words by dying American footsoldiers. Not 1 of them, however, had illusions that he had somehow accomplished something worthwhile in the process of making the Supreme Sacrifice”. Vonnegut certainly doubts the acceptability of men dying in war. Beidler argues that Vonnegut alone makes the correct presentation of war in his book, while Danielle Steele and the other writer romanticize it. Beidler censures writers who write about war simply to make profit, commenting, “some of the best recent commercial business in Vietnam writing is being done by texts that mine from the war a new pornography of popular desire, and thus threaten to make national memory nearly as bad a cultural business as the kind of self-mythification that helped engender the conflict in the first place”.

This sentiment on war writing is shared by Mary O’Hare in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. She accuses Vonnegut, “You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs”. O’Hare is worried that Vonnegut’s book will turn out like the pro-war writing that romanticizes and encourages war, especially in young people, but Vonnegut reassures her that that is not the case and becomes her friend after that, he says. Beidler continues his argument explaining how the different writing that Vonnegut is doing is “good business” and that he “continues to enlarge our vision of what happened to us and the Vietnamese there, and of how, nearly three decades later, the war continues to inscribe itself, in varying cultural reinterpretations, on the American memory”.

To achieve this phenomenally impacting prose that Beidler is praising, Vonnegut employs humor to challenge his readers to rethink the war. His fiction, much like Bornstien’s class, mentioned earlier, actually aims at preventing the death of human beings. However, fiction can do amazing things, as Vonnegut himself said in *A Man without a Country*, “A book is an arrangement of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numerals, and about eight punctuation marks, and people can cast their eyes over these and envision the eruption of Mount Vesuvius or the Battle of Waterloo.” Here, one can see the hope that Vonnegut has for his own writings. He wrote profusely about war: World War II, Vietnam, and later Iraq, and while he never single handedly stopped one of them, he must have made a dent somewhere along the way.

It seems as though Vonnegut has made his mark. He wrote not precisely to end war, but to ease people’s struggles with war. He was fighting war, but not in the same way that protestors marching on Washington during Vietnam did.

Nevertheless, Vonnegut did write and convey anti-war beliefs. Strangely enough, *Slaughterhouse-Five* along with much of his other writings are strongly non-sentimental in order to convey these anti-war beliefs. While sentimentality and emotional appeal are typical approaches to rhetorical arguments, Vonnegut often disregards sentiment in favor of reductive reasoning in favor of a moral point he is trying to

make. The epigraph to the novel is from the Christmas hymn “Silent Night.” It reads, “The cattle are lowing./ The Baby awakes./ But the little Lord Jesus/ No crying He makes.” The epigraph initially seems to have little to do with the story of Billy Pilgrim as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany World War II, but the last line does seem to signify the approach Vonnegut aims for in his anti-war novel—that is, a lack of crying about it or a lack of pathos as a rhetorical device in his argument against war. One way of saying it might be that if God isn’t going to cry, then Vonnegut isn’t either. In some ways, Vonnegut may be arguing here subtly that an anti-war stance can often be as sentimental as a pro-war one. In other words, anyone who becomes a die-hard John Wayne figure for any cause is suspect from Vonnegut’s perspective.

The narrative of the novel maintains this unemotional attitude towards the horrifying experience of war. The first line of the novel, which reads, “All this happened, more or less”, is not the voice of a reliable narrator. However, that subtle rhetorical choice, as the novel progresses, seems to indicate that the narrator is not at fault for being unreliable, and at times downright unbelievable, but that war makes an individual unreliable—that war disrupts reality, continuity, and reliability. Vonnegut himself says a little later of the book, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre”.

Interestingly, Vonnegut continues that “The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true”, which draws out further questions concerning the rhetorical choices that this anti-war novel is attempting to make and the nature of truth in such a narrative. If the “war parts” of the story are true, then it begs the questions, “What isn’t?” and “Why are there parts that are untrue?”

Incidentally, these questions return to the original one: “How does fiction, a medium that essentially makes up stories and is rarely taken seriously, end war?” On this matter, James Lundquist writes, “For Vonnegut, the subject matter is not simply Nazi atrocity...but the aesthetic problem remains the same... How to conceptualize and define the night terrors of an era so unreal, so believable, that the very term fiction seems no longer to have any currency”. Fiction certainly seems to have some bearing on war issues, but Vonnegut himself seems wary of his own effectiveness in preventing war.

Another rhetorical approach that Vonnegut employs throughout his anti-war novel, and which also appears on the first page, is the juxtaposition of humor with horror. He does it in his second paragraph, which reads, “It [Dresden] looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground”. Here, the line comparing a city which housed numerous prisoners of war is jokingly compared to Dayton, Ohio, a pretty boring place altogether—I’ve been there and can vouch for that. The humor and the disturbing tone draw out the complexities of dealing with-of talking about-war. Vonnegut is especially aware of the immense gravity of his subject, though he chooses to undermine that very subject, war, with humor. Whether his attempt at undermining the war efforts of Vietnam were effective, one can only conjecture—such things are difficult to measure. However, according to Lawrence R. Broer, “While Vonnegut comments about the ineffectiveness of war protests, the anti-war element in this novel is direct and powerful”. Broer continues, “In one telling image, a war movie run in reverse, Vonnegut demonstrates the power of art

to subvert the destructive process of war". Hence, at least one reader found *Slaughterhouse-Five* subversive enough to somehow challenge the processes that were culminating into the deaths of human life.

As the first chapter of the novel grows more met fictive and Vonnegut as author and character begin to describe the actual composition of the novel, movie star "Harrison Starr" asks Vonnegut if his book is an "anti-war" book. Vonnegut surprisingly answers in the affirmative. However, Harrison Starr makes a strangely insightful response saying, "Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?" Vonnegut explains this comment saying, "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too". Here, Vonnegut admits the difficulties associated with trying to stop a war, yet he still *Slaughterhouse-Five* in spite of his, and Harrison Starr's, beliefs about anti-war books.

Another illuminating aspect in this first chapter of this widely popular anti-war novel is Vonnegut's commentary on his educational experience. He notes how after World War II, he studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, and explains, "At that time, they were teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody". He adds, "Another thing they taught was that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting", and goes on to say that his father told him shortly before he died that Vonnegut had "never wrote a story with a villain in it", and Vonnegut credits that to his education "after the war." Here, Vonnegut makes a subtle argument against war and implies that war, which makes enemies out of other human beings, is a result of a lack of education, which is encouraging for Rita Bornstein's classes-that at least according to Vonnegut, they are doing something right.

In fact, it is only by becoming "unstuck in time" that Billy Pilgrim or anyone can escape war it seems to Vonnegut or his Tralfamadorian philosophers, who assert that "Only on earth is there any talk of free will". From the perspective of the Tralfamadorians, war is inevitable as are all things including the destruction of the earth-and it is only by becoming thinking outside of unpleasant moments that one can escape them. And yet the book mentions that Vonnegut appreciates Lot's wife for looking back on the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah, even though she turns to a pillar of salt for doing it because it is so "human." Hence, the Tralfamadorian concepts of escapism, while offering one means of exiting the horrors of war, are not the same as the more human views of looking back as Vonnegut offers us, the readers. According to some critics who investigate Vonnegut's anti-war stance, "The status of the Tralfamadorians is therefore the most important issue in any discussion of *Slaughterhouse-Five*". What is elemental about the Tralfamadorians in the novel, however, is simply that they offer a different perspective than the human perspective, as well as offer Billy Pilgrim an escape from Dresden. Essentially, the novel is not simply about anti-war, but even about accepting differing viewpoints, a concept which includes a sense of pacifism, but is bigger than it.

The reason that Vonnegut's style works so well with this kind of politicized fiction is his satirical tone. Additionally, the comment made on the title page of the book about the novel being "schizophrenic" is certainly true-the novel jumps around in time and space, throws a motley number of bits and pieces together and hopes to make a statement; and it does. The novel's own psychological schizophrenia is evidently drawn

out by the problematic nature of war. That structure almost expresses the concept that war will shatter an individual's mind, the same way that it did to *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The fact that anti-war books about World War I, such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* first published in 1969 and *Catch-22* finished in 1955 and officially published in 1960, gained so much mass appeal until Vietnam implies one of two truths-that good books just take a couple of years to "catch-on" or that the people of Vietnam were looking for a language with which to discuss the war and their frustration with it. Books like this offer protesters a language, a voice, a common thought that functions as a banner for this group and can be passed around to stir up more thought and make ideas spread. Critic Willaim Rodney Allen writes,

"A major reason *Slaughterhouse-Five* had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its anti-war message to a most receptive audience"

Slaughterhouse-Five was not written for World War II; it was written for the Vietnam War, and to address inhumane actions in general. That is why it continues to be read and find application, even to the present war the United States is engaged in. Essentially, an anti-war book is usually written about a war, but it is also necessarily written after the fact. The result is not a commentary upon the war that the book is about, but a means of addressing later wars, later issues, as well as a means of healing from war in the aftermath.

Allen has an interesting reading aligning Vonnegut's philosophies with those of the Tralfamadorians, writing, "It [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] refuses to be a self-satisfied anti-war book like, say, *Johnny Got His Gun*. While conveying a sense of outrage, horror, regret, and even despair over the insanity of war, Vonnegut does not think that stopping war is a realistic possibility or that, if it were, this would end the pain of the human condition".

This perspective rings true in Vonnegut's conversation with Harrison Starr and the concept of an anti-glacier novel. Many critics would point to *Slaughterhouse-Five* as having a clear anti-war perspective, but rarely does a postmodern novel carry the weight of a universal truth. Yet, Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*, once said, "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." It seems Vonnegut would fall in line with Wiesel, having experienced moments of powerlessness and still willing to write against social evils. The serenity prayer found in *Slaughterhouse-Five* embraces these sentiments as well, asking God for the ability to "accept the things I cannot change," which does not seem to be the same mode of the anti-war protesters who have incited physical confrontations at times with police officers and military troops. Concerning Vonnegut's worldview, critic John R. May writes, "In each of his novels Vonnegut offers us some alternative, however slim, to the path of disaster that we seem consistently to prefer. There is hope, though, only if man respects the limits for truly humane contributions to his fellow man". What *Slaughterhouse-Five*, along with several of Vonnegut's books, does is that it gives many people a means of handling the atrocities of war. According to Peter G. Jones, "Vonnegut's work is a unique fusion of science fiction, secular despair, man's losing battle against technology, and a cyclical vision of the end, even for Indianapolis. And war provides the central theme for it all". The fact that Billy

Pilgrim's son becomes a Green Beret in Vietnam seems to complicate the issue still further. Indeed, Pilgrim does not want his son to fight in the war after he has experienced the horrors of it, yet his wishes are empty and his son still deserves his father's love.

Vonnegut criticizes aspects of war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he is not wholly anti-war in his thinking. In another interview with Joel Bleifuss, Vonnegut calls himself a "pacifist," but also says, "I myself feel that our country, for whose Constitution I fought in a just war, might as well have been invaded by Martians and body snatchers." The fact that Vonnegut calls World War II, in which he fought, a "just war" seems to denote its necessity. An extreme pacifist would not concede this point, but Vonnegut did because he was brilliantly willing and capable of looking at war from multiple perspectives. Bleifuss's later question is, "How have you gotten involved in the anti-war movement? And how would you compare the movement against a war in Iraq with the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era?" To which Vonnegut responds:

When it became obvious what a dumb and cruel and spiritually and financially and militarily ruinous mistake our war in Vietnam was, every artist worth a damn in this country, every serious writer, painter, stand-up comedian, musician, actor and actress, you name it, came out against the thing. (Bleifuss) However, Vonnegut then goes on to say that their "weapon proved to have the power of a banana-cream pie three feet in diameter when dropped from a stepladder five-feet high" and that it "the right of citizens to peaceably assemble, and petition their government for a redress of grievances, 'ain't worth a pitcher of warm spit,'" (Bleifuss). In Vonnegut's older age, he certainly became more disenchanted with the idea of anti-war protests having an effect, yet he continued to speak out against atrocities, including certain aspects of the war in Iraq, until his death.

In any event, *Slaughterhouse-Five* paired with Vonnegut's other writings gives readers insight into his philosophies and what he was attempting to accomplish in his writing. Vonnegut

hated war, just as any sane person would hate war. Very few people are actually pro-war, and Vonnegut's perspectives on Vietnam, for example, as opposed to World War II show just how willing he was to explore various perspectives concerning war. So, while he considered himself a pacifist, he also saw World War II as a just war, and decisively wrote to curb injustices. In many ways, reading Vonnegut would enable one to approach the goals set out by Ms. Bornstein and her peace-war studies course: "to discuss the role of literature in elucidating human problems." So it goes.

Conclusion

Vonnegut has a very strong reason to have anti-war sentiments as he has suffered when he was made prisoner of war by the Germans. He was subjected to lot of pain as he sees people suffer during the war. Mothers losing their sons, wives their husbands, children their father, sisters their brothers and many more casualties.

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