

Slaughterhouse Five

Written by
Kurt Vonnegut

Analysis by
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Summary

Slaughterhouse Five is a novel that follows Billy Pilgrim, an American World War II veteran, through his journeys in time. The book centers around Billy's experiences in the war and his time on the alien planet Tralfamadore, where he learns about the fluidity of time. The book delves into the bombing of Dresden, Germany, and the morals of war.

Element One

Time Jumps

Quotes

“I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber.” (page 109)

“Billy Pilgrim says that the Universe does not look like a lot of bright little dots to the creatures from Tralfamadore. The creatures can see where each star has been and where it is going, so that the heavens are filled with rarefied, luminous spaghetti. And Tralfamadorians don’t see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes- ‘with babies’ legs at one end and old people’s legs at the other,’ says Billy Pilgrim.” (page 110)

“Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.” (page 29)

Definition

Throughout the book, Vonnegut incorporates time jumps very often. There is no pattern between how much time Billy travels through, sometimes years, sometimes days. However, there is a pattern in when and where he goes. Some of the most visited settings include, Ilium, a fictional town in New York state, Germany during the war, specifically Dresden, Tralfamadore, and a hospital in Vermont.

Importance

While the time jumps move the story forward and interests the reader, the fact that they are included further relates to one of the book’s general motifs: time. The quotes on pages 109 and 110 provide a simple explanation for how time is thought of by the Tralfamadorians and teach Billy Pilgrim. They see every moment all at once. They believe that every event is meant to happen the way it does, and always will.

Impact

The reader is introduced to these foreign ideas and must remember what Billy believes about time in order to understand his actions throughout the book, his casualty about death, (including his own), and how he handles everything he’s been through. The reader is also simply interested in the unique, non-linear style, making the book more of a page turner.

Element Two

Point of View

Quotes

“All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.” (page 1)

“An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, ‘There they go, there they go.’ He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.” (page 160)

Definition

The point of view switches multiple times between 1st and 3rd person. The first section of the book is written in first person, as shown in the quote from page 1, then the rest is 3rd person with occasional references to the narrator, such as on page 160.

Importance

It connects the author to the book, making it semi-autobiographical while maintaining the fictitious story of Billy Pilgrim. It also introduces the mysterious character of the narrator. The fact that the majority of the book is in 3rd person makes it easier to tell Billy Pilgrim's story.

Impact

The reader experiences something of a shock when they encounter the narrator referring to himself after he hasn't spoken in the first person in at least a hundred pages. Considering the scenario in which he pops up in, it's a bit humorous and random. This also reminds the reader that the book is semi-autobiographical and encourages the reader to separate the fiction from the non fiction in the book.



Element Three

Dialogue

'He's simply echoing things we say,' said Rumfoord.

'Oh,' said Lily.

'He's got echolalia now.'

'Oh.'" (pages 245-246)

Quotes

"As Trout lugubriously slung the bag from his shoulder, Billy Pilgrim approached him. 'Mr. Trout-?'

'Yes?'

'Are-are you Kilgore Trout?'

'Yes.' Trout supposed that Billy had some complaint about the way his newspapers were being delivered. He did not think of himself as a writer for the simple reason that the world had never allowed him to think of himself in this way.

'The-the writer?' said Billy.

'The what?'

Billy was certain that he had made a mistake.

'There's a writer named Kilgore Trout.'

'There is?' Trout looked foolish and dazed.

'You never heard of him?' Trout shook his head. 'Nobody-nobody ever did.'" (page 214-215)

"It was difficult for Rumfoord to take Billy seriously, since Rumfoord had so long considered Billy a repulsive non-person who would be much better off dead. Now, with Billy speaking clearly and to the point, Rumfoord's ears wanted to treat the words as a foreign language that was not worth hearing. 'What did he say?' said Rumfoord.

Lily had to serve as an interpreter. 'He said he was there,' she explained.

'He was where?'

'I don't know,' said Lily. 'Where were you?' she asked Billy.

'Dresden,' said Billy.

'Dresden,' Lily told Rumfoord.

Definition

Vonnegut decides to really limit the amount of dialogue in the book. When it is present, the dialogue will not last long and is usually composed of short sentences back and forth between characters.

Importance

The lack of dialogue serves to force the reader to take a step back from the story. This book cannot immerse a reader in one scene or moment due to the nature of how often it switches up. This is another element that adds to the book's particular style.

Impact

The lack of dialogue affects the reader by enforcing trust in the narrator. Often times the narrator will make a statement about somebody's thoughts or feelings, then dialogue will happen that confirms that. An example of this was on pages 214-215. Another example is on pages 245-246, where the narrator clearly states what one character is thinking, then dialogue is presented to back that up. As often as this occurs, it turns the narrator into a somewhat limited omniscient being, meaning he knows more than just what he or even Billy is thinking.

Emulation Scene

Tyra was scared. The fluorescent lights had gone out, now the room was dark and cold. She was alone in this strange, beeping room without her mommy. Tyra was scared most of all of the monsters lurking in the shadows, hiding under her bed. Two days ago, Tyra was in her own bed, being comforted by her mommy. Her tummy hurt, but that was okay as long as mommy was there. Mommy turned the lights out and checked for monsters, so that was okay too. Now Tyra couldn't help but cry. She cried and cried, louder, until she woke the sleeping girl in the next bed.

I was groggy. Rolled over and checked the time. It was getting close to midnight, which usually wasn't late at all for me, but the hospital really takes its toll on you. As I faded into consciousness, the screams and cries of my roommate got louder. I knew I had to make them stop if I wanted to get any sleep.

"Tyra? Tyra what's wrong?"

"Mommmy!! I want my mommy!!"

There were so many monsters under Tyra's bed. She could hear them scratching and creaking and growling over her own screams. The big girl came over, and asked what was wrong, so Tyra told her.

"I think there are monsters in the dark," she whispered.

"Do you want me to check? I can look under your bed." A nod. The older girl lowered herself to the floor, facing all the mysterious nooks and crannies that resembled voids. She couldn't see what Tyra did. "There's nothing, nobody. Just the floor and some dust."

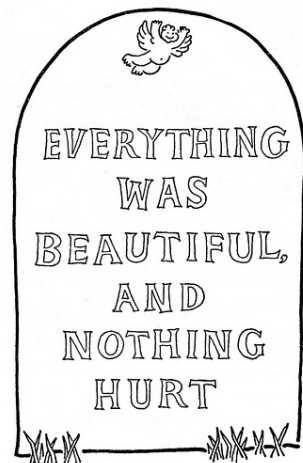
I tried to comfort the poor girl as much as I could, telling her that mommy would be back in the morning. She calmed down, and I wished her good night. I lumbered back into bed, closed my eyes, and opened them three days later. Tyra was ready to go home, her veins flushed with medication. The room was bright, mommy was by her side. No more monsters under the bed.

Use of Elements

I used time jumps twice in my short scene. Neither of them were very drastic in the amount of time passed like the ones in *Slaughterhouse Five*, because I wanted the scene to make sense while keeping it short. The jumps make the story flow through time better, and prevent from having to describe everything that happened in sequence. I aimed to make the reader comfortable with the jumps, as in Vonnegut's book, where the jumps did not distract the reader.

My scene started out in 3rd person, switched to 1st, back to 3rd, and finally 1st. When using 3rd person, I was following the actions, thoughts, and feelings of a little girl named Tyra. When in 1st person, I, the author, became the narrator, inserting myself into the story. This brought in a few similarities to the novel. While *Slaughterhouse Five* is considered semi-autobiographical, I took that and condensed it into a memoir type of story. *Slaughterhouse Five* also had some fictitious aspects occurring in the sections of the story in 3rd person, meaning the sections told about Billy Pilgrim. I tried to incorporate this with the monsters under the bed.

I made sure that my story did not rely on dialogue, as Vonnegut wrote like so. In order to do so, I kept the dialogue short and simple. I also used the dialogue a few times as a transition between points of view. For example, I would be using 1st person, go to dialogue, then continue in 3rd person.



About the Author:

Kurt Vonnegut...

...was a German-American author of 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 5 plays, and 5 non-fiction books. Some of his most notable works were "Cat's Cradle," "Breakfast of Champions," and "Slaughterhouse Five." He was a World War II veteran, having witnessed the bombing of Dresden in which over 100,000 people were killed. In 1945 he was liberated, and wrote his first novel in 1952. Vonnegut was also an artist with a unique style. Displayed are some of his works.

