Aliens, Time Travel, and Dresden -Slaughterhouse-Five Part I: Crash Course Literature 212

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi! I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we're gonna talk about Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five.

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! You mean like the Motown group that sings that song, "glad all over-"

No singing, Me From The Past, and no, it is not a Motown group. You're thinking of the Dave Clark Five, and for the record, they were not from Detroit; they were British.

(Intro)

So Slaughterhouse Five, also known by its under-appreciated alternate title, The Children's Crusade, is one of the most widely-read anti-war books of the late 20th century. It was written by Kurt Vonnegut during the height of the Vietnam War, but this novel is an attempt to chronicle the violence of the World War II bombing of Dresden and modern warfare more broadly.

But it's important to understand, again, those two historical contexts: the one in which the book was written and the one the book is about. And the question at the heart of Slaughterhouse Five is what role can literature - particularly works of literary fiction - play in addressing large scale acts of violence? What is the role of literature in examining war?

But of course that makes Slaughterhouse Five sound very sad and serious, which it is, but it's also a surprisingly and very weirdly funny book.

Let's start with an outline of the main events in the Thought Bubble.

So Vonnegut's protagonist is Billy Pilgrim. But rather than being on a linear journey toward a holy place, as his name might suggest, Pilgrim has flashbacks and fantasies that he believes are actual time travel. Pilgrim describes himself as being "unstuck in time." And rather than describing his life events in chronological order, he jumps between times and places.

The events that comprise Pilgrim's disjointed narrative actually have quite a logical progression- like a rough outline of them looks like this.

Pilgrim fought in World War II. He was a prisoner of war in Germany. He was being held in Dresden when that city was largely destroyed by allied bombing toward the end of the war, and Pilgrim survived because he and his fellow prisoners were held 60 feet underground in a former slaughterhouse.

After the fire-storm, Pilgrim and his fellow detainees are put to work cleaning up the charred remains of bodies. And then after the war, Billy Pilgrim has trouble returning to civilian life, spent some time in a mental institution, but then eventually marries and becomes an optometrist- a profession, it rather goes without saying, that involves sight.

Anyway, then Pilgrim has a breakdown while listening to a barbershop quartet whose expressions remind him of his guards at Dresden.

He becomes convinced that aliens (Tralfamadorians) abducted him and increasingly unmoored, Pilgrim publicly professes the Tralfamadorian vision of time and space.

Now, Pilgrims narrative sounds a little crazy, especially since it's delivered in such a non-linear manner, but Vonnegut makes the logic of his mental breakdown perfectly clear.

As such, Vonnegut creates a novel that demonstrates how war trauma affects the individual's sight.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So where did Vonnegut get all of these insights? Well, in part, they came from Vonnegut's own experience in the war, as he acknowledges in the book. It's very interesting that the first and last chapters of Slaughterhouse Five are written in first person from the perspective of Kurt Vonnegut.

In the very beginning of the novel and at its very end he calls attention to the fact that we are reading a novel. That's an unusual and bold choice because generally, as readers, we wanna forget that we're reading a story, right? And feel like we're living inside of reality. But Vonnegut wants to unmoor us from our expectations of fiction just as Billy Pilgrim is unmoored from time.

So Kurt Vonnegut was born- Ohhh, it's time for the open letter! Hey there, Kurt Vonnegut.

Dear Kurt Vonnegut:

I actually met you once at the University of Alabama.

My primary memory of that evening is that someone came up to you and said, "Sir, you can't smoke in here," and you replied, "Well, I can smoke or I can leave."

You were and remain a great inspiration to me as a writer and one thing that I always think about with you is that even though, obviously, you had a pretty screwed up life, I always felt like you had it figured out. Long story short, I love you, Kurt Vonnegut.

Puppet: I love you too!

Oh, thank you, Kurt! Best wishes. John Green.

Anyway, Vonnegut was born in beautiful Indianapolis in 1922. He spent some time at Cornell University before entering the United States army at the age of twenty. And like Billy Pilgrim, he was shipped to Europe, had a very brief combat experience, and then became a prisoner of war during the Battle of the Bulge, which you'll remember from Crash Course History.

And then, like Pilgrim, Vonnegut was sent to Dresden, where he was interred at a former slaughterhouse. At the time, Dresden was considered a relatively safe place to be. In Slaughterhouse Five, an English officer envies the American prisoners who are sent to Dresden. He says:

"You needn't worry about bombs […] Dresden is an open city. It is undefended, and contains no war industries or troop concentrations of any importance."

But it turns out, of course, that in World War II, such things were not prerequisites for getting bombed.

Between February 13th and 15th of 1945, British and American bombers dropped nearly 4,000 tons of bombs and incendiary devices on Dresden. This created a fire-storm that destroyed an enormous part of the city and cost tens of thousands of lives. And then Dresden was subject to more air raids of this sort in March and April.

Now by all accounts, the suffering on the ground was tremendous, but writers, artists, and historians have found it difficult to adequately convey the horrors that took place.

Vonnegut approaches the need to testify to these events during

Slaughterhouse Five by using a fictional narrative that seeks to both understand and evade the past. Although his narrator was in Dresden during the bombing and fire-storm, he learns what took place by eavesdropping on whispering guards. And that's a way of diminishing the immediacy of violence to rumor.

Like Pilgrim reports the guards' conversation as follows:

"There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn."

This conversation of whispers, transmitted in a foreign language and translated by the author, is remembered many years after the fact. And as readers, we have plenty of reason to question it.

I mean, just look at the vague nature of the language used. Consider the repetition of “everything-" "Everything organic, everything that would burn." Well, “everything” is a pretty broad concept. And in this context, it allows the narrator not to imagine the specific, horrible details. Like here, vague language provides a stand-in for detailed testimony.

But there’s also something horrific and visceral about that idea generally. The idea of “everything organic” burning. It implies the loss of not just our lives but all life.

Slaughterhouse Five also uses figures of speech as a means of evasion.

"The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals."

I mean, just as you can’t look directly at the sun, Billy Pilgrim can’t look directly at the destruction of Dresden. He has to tell us what it’s like because what it is is unspeakable. And this sort of evasion is very common in eyewitness reports of violence.

The German writer W. G. Sebald chronicled how often eyewitness reports of the bombing of German cities contained stereotypical phrases. "These clichés," he explains, “cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend."

The, quote, “unreal effect” that they produce is a very real depiction of how the human mind reacts to extreme suffering. Here’s another example of trying to see the horror of war by not looking directly at it: Vonnegut describes the post-bombing Dresden as a mute reflection in the contorted faces of prison guards, and he creates a shocking and memorable image"

"The guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet."

So what does this say about the guards? What are we to make of the silence in this scene? Why is it that the guards say nothing? Finally, why might Vonnegut use this goofy metaphor of a barbershop quartet in a silent film at this particular moment?

Are we supposed to laugh at absurd moments like this or the repetition of the phrase “so it goes” whenever anyone dies? And if we do feel that instinct to laugh, are we then meant to cringe at ourselves for having had that impulse?

Regardless, that image doesn’t go where we expect it to and so it’s designed to make us uncomfortable. And that’s its power. That’s its beauty.

And it’s worth remembering that Vonnegut describes himself as often feeling speechless when thinking about the bombing of Dresden. Like in the first chapter of Slaughterhouse Five, he writes:

"I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought too it would be a masterpiece, or at least make me a lot of money since the subject was so big. But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then… and not many words come now, either."

And it’s clear that Vonnegut has a pretty complicated relationship with the words that eventually do, in fact, come. Like his novel, famously, opens with the following lines:

"All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true."

Pretty much true? That’s another phrase that’s designed to make us uncomfortable.

And as Vonnegut hints at in that passage I just read, what does it mean for Vonnegut to gain acclaim and wealth for what he has written? In an introduction to the 1976 edition of Slaughterhouse Five, Vonnegut expresses some guilt at having benefited from its publication:

"The Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned, was so meaningless, finally, that only one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it. I am that person. I wrote this book, which earned a lot of money for me and made my reputation, such as it is. One way or another, I got two or three dollars for every person killed. Some business I'm in."

Now that’s a classic example of Vonnegut’s self-deprecating humor, but the “business” of providing testimony does remain important work, I would argue, even if it is through the flawed vehicle of narrative fiction.

Precisely because it struggles to look directly at the firebombing of Dresden, Slaughterhouse Five provides ways of thinking about how we live and love and fight and heal.

And it makes us think about how we frame the stories that we tell ourselves about the past. And Billy Pilgrim’s unstuckness in time reminds us that, as the great William Faulkner wrote, “The past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.”

Next week, we’ll talk about Billy Pilgrim’s alternate universe filled with toilet-plunger aliens who offer a new perspective on the violence of mankind. And we’ll discuss the philosophy of Tralfamadorians (a philosophy summed up by the phrase, “and so it goes”). And, finally, we'll consider what, if anything, an “anti-war” can do about war, or really about anything else.

Thanks for watching. I’ll see you next week.

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Thank you for watching, and as we say in my hometown, don’t forget to be awesome.