PTSD and Alien Abduction - Slaughterhouse-Five Part 2: Crash Course Literature 213

Crash Course: Literature
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=====INTRODUCTION=====

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature and today we're going to continue our discussion of Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five.

So Slaughterhouse-Five is often called an anti-war novel, but that raises a question: what does it mean for a novel to be against war? Are novels in the business of passing judgment? Can they actually change the actual world? Well, that's some of what we're going to talk about today.

So, like Kurt Vonnegut, our protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, struggles to make sense of what he has witnessed during the Allied firebombing of Dresden in World War Two. And there's a tremendous tension between the desire to testify to that violence and a need to repress the traumatic memories of it. Along the way, we're going to talk about free will and we're also going to probe Billy Pilgrim's stories of alien abduction.

John From The Past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Alien...probe...

John of the Now: Boy, me from the past, if you think that's funny, you're gonna love the show South Park. It comes on in about two years. But anyway, we are going to get into some anatomical humor and I'm sure it will please you.

=====CONTENT=====

So Vonnegut published Slaughterhouse-Five in 1969, before the term post-traumatic stress disorder had entered the language, but Billy Pilgrim clearly exhibits symptoms of this condition. I mean, first off his experiences during the war were definitely traumatic, I mean, he gets lost behind enemy lines during the Battle of the Bulge, he's taken prisoner by the Germans, he sees a fellow soldier die from gangrene while walking to a POW camp, so it goes. He's crammed for days into a train with other POWs, he survives the bombing of Dresden and observes the aftermath of the firestorm including, like, many charred bodies. And then he witnesses a fellow POW being executed for stealing a teapot, so it goes. So no wonder Pilgrim experiences flashbacks to the war as if these incidences were happening in the present. It's not surprising that he suffers from hallucinations either, but what's the deal with the toilet plunger-shaped aliens?

So here's an English-y way of looking at it, Billy Pilgrim has a lot of blocked-up stuff, right, let's call it excrement. Toilet plungers are in the business of unblocking drains, right? So in other words, fantasies involving the Tralfamadorian aliens help Pilgrim work out the shame and horror of his war experience. I mean look, the Germans may have Pilgrim stripped when he arrives at their camp, right? So do the Tralfamadorians. Germans refuse to answer why they beat one prisoner and not another, the Tralfamadorians refuse to answer why they've kidnapped Pilgrim, the Germans confine Pilgrim to a slaughterhouse, the Tralfamadorians confine him to a zoo.

So obviously there are parallels between Pilgrim's past and his fantasy life. But in his fantasy world, Pilgrim can rewrite these painful events, right? Like for example, Pilgrim felt emasculated when he was a prisoner of war- he was stripped, forced to don a woman's coat, and ridiculed. But in Pilgrim's fantasy of alien captivity, he discovers that he can, quote, "enjoy his body for the first time". And he claims that the Tralfamadorians consider him, quote, "a splendid specimen", if only because they had no way of knowing otherwise, and he describes himself, famously, as possessing, and here I am quoting, "a tremendous wang". He is desired by a 20-year-old porn star, he's incredibly virile, he's able to sire a child almost immediately, I mean how is that for revisionism? It's the greatest POW experience of all time! Now some would say this revision is a symptom of madness, but I would argue that it could also be seen as a necessary step in the journey toward recovery.

And then there are the deeper, more philosophical aspects of Pilgrim's fantasy, particularly the Tralfamadorian concept of time and space. Tralfamadorians view past, present, and future events all at once. Like, one alien explains that these moments exist simultaneously and can be viewed much as humans might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. And since an individual can't change past, present, or future events, the Tralfamadorian vision of time and space denies the possibility of free will, right? Many classical Greek plays support the idea that individuals are governed by their fate, like you'll remember our old friend, Oedipus, who was told by the Oracle that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, and despite his best efforts, he does. And it's still gross.

So why are we talking about free will in the context of reading Slaughterhouse-Five? Well, let's go to the thought bubble.

=====THOUGHT BUBBLE=====

For one thing, the concept of free will is related to the concept of moral responsibility. Like, in the broadest terms, if one doesn't have free will, one can't be responsible for one's behavior. I mean, no matter how heinous the crime that you might commit, you can be morally absolved because you had no choice.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Pilgrim makes some problematic life decisions. I mean, his choice of a marriage partner for one, is not particularly inspired. "Billy didn't want to marry Ugly Valencia. She was one of the symptoms of his disease. He knew he was going crazy, when he heard himself proposing marriage to her..."

Yet his life choices aren't particularly immoral, I mean, he served as a chaplain's assistant in the war, a role in which he is, quote, "powerless to harm the enemy or help his friends". He works as an optometrist, a job in which he helps other people to see better, he supports his family, a role in which he is a provider, so why would Pilgrim want to be absolved of his moral responsibility?

Well it's obviously because Billy feels guilt. Guilt for surviving the Dresden bombings, guilt for being on the same side as the bombers, guilt for becoming well-to-do after the war. In adopting a world view that denies free will, Billy can't blame himself for surviving, or for being complicit in mass murder, or for benefiting financially at the war's end. But we also see this conversation about the relationship between free will and moral responsibility reflected in the structure of Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut framed Slaughterhouse-Five with two chapters that at least seem to be narrated in his own voice, and at times he even includes himself as a character in the main action.

For example, the author appears among the prisoners of war, and again at the Dresden corpse mines. And these appearances help ground the narrative in a form of reality that Billy Pilgrim can't see. Our reality. But Vonnegut mainly presents scenes from Pilgrim's perspective, and as such, the narrative conflates historical events with fiction, and that fiction is conflating historical events with fantasies of alien abduction. Thanks thought bubble...

=====MORE CONTENT=====

So since Vonnegut also presents these events in the order that Pilgrim experiences them, the narrative jumps back and forth in time and space. And that means that in certain ways, Slaughterhouse-Five is kind of a work of Tralfamadorian fiction, right? Pilgrim quotes an alien as defining Tralfamadorian fiction as follows: "each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message, describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time."

Obviously in 1969, Vonnegut had never had the experience of scrolling through a twitter feed, but I can't help but notice the similarity between his fantasy of Tralfamadorian literature and our reality of the feed-based reading experience. Slaughterhouse-F-- oh, it's time for the open letter. Oh, it's my twitter.

Dear Twitter, you really are all things at once. But I have to say, you're kind of the worst possible version of Tralfamadorian literature. Like I follow Walt Whitman on Twitter (and yes I'm aware that he's deceased) and sometimes my Twitter feed will literally be "I contain multitudes" then followed by "Don't miss the new season of Rich Kids of Beverly Hills". I made that show up, isn't that a hilarious idea for a show? Oh my God, are you kidding me, that's real? So I love the idea of your asynchronicity and I love how you unmoor me from time, but I'm not sure you present an image of life that's "beautiful and surprising and deep" as much as you present distraction. Best wishes, John Green.

Anyway, Slaughterhouse-Five is obviously like Tralfamadorian literature because, one, it contains a series of brief, urgent messages, two, its scenes are presented out of order, giving the effect that they take place all at once, and three, Vonnegut has obviously chosen each scene carefully, and yet it's not a work of alien fiction, it's a deeply human book that does contain a beginning, and a middle, and an end. And it does depict causes and effects, and it does create suspense, just not in the usual way.

Billy Pilgrim longs to believe that he can access past moments through time travel and although that might seem misguided, it's actually a deeply human response to loss. I mean, I think we've all felt that way. Who isn't familiar with wanting to go back to a time of innocence?

In its way, Slaughterhouse-Five is an anti-bildungsroman, it's a novel about someone who wants to go back to a world before their education. Because Billy Pilgrim's education has taught him, as the Romans put it, that, "man is a wolf to man".

One of the most famous aspects of Slaughterhouse-Five is that Vonnegut repeats the Tralfamadorian mantra, so it goes, each time he mentions a death in the novel. It's a brutal and radically unsentimental way of grappling with death, and therein lies its power. I mean, how are we supposed to respond to Billy Pilgrim's mind being destroyed by trauma? How is he supposed to respond to it? So it goes.

But I think it's clear in Slaughterhouse-Five that Vonnegut doesn't want readers just to accept traumatic events enabled by weapons of mass destruction as a matter of course, as part of human life. The novel is so intentionally unadorned and unsentimental that it's aiming to shock us out of our passive perspective.

But I think Slaughterhouse-Five is Tralfamadorian literature, in one sense at least, as the alien confesses, "what we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at once". And the word marvelous is very interesting there because, of course, we don't marvel at just the wonderful things, we also marvel at the horrible ones. Vonnegut's gift was to render it all fresh and new, both the great and the terrible, and allow us to marvel at it. Because it's funny and because it's absurd and unflinching, Vonnegut describes mass murder and torture and ordinary death in a way that makes it feel real.

There are two great modern human dangers- first, the danger of our proclivity toward mass violence, and secondly, the danger of us averting our gaze from it. We all know humans have the ability to distract ourselves from it and in doing so to tacitly accept the intolerable. I mean, frankly, we're all doing that every day, and those dangers are the depths that Vonnegut seeks to expose. And in that sense at least, I truly believe that a novel can be against war. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

=====CLOSING=====

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