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On Slaughterhouse-Five as an Antiwar Novel

The back of *Slaughterhouse-Five* proclaims that it is “one of the world’s great antiwar books,” and this would appear, at least on the face of things, to be the case, given the wide acclaim the book has received as such over the years. On closer examination, however, the book seems to take its ostensible purpose so far beyond a commentary on war and combat that it becomes an anti-*everything* book, which severely detracts from its impact. From a technical perspective, since war is a thing, yes, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an antiwar novel, but only because war is a thing, and the book argues against the very thing-ness of everything. That is, insofar as it argues at all, for the constant jerking of the reader back and forth across time and space, combined with the overarching science-fiction theme and the sheer impossibility of identifying with Billy Pilgrim on a personal level further serves to destabilize the narrative’s credibility as an argumentative piece. Unfortunately it is not clear if Vonnegut is attempting to make a specific case against war, one that is in favor of pacifism, or is simply using the writing process as a way to come to terms with the events he experienced during the war; the best that can be said with any certainty with respect to war is that Vonnegut isn’t *for* it. In that sense, and that sense alone, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel, as careful consideration of the character of Billy Pilgrim and the world he inhabits reveals.

“Why don’t you write an anti-glacier book instead?” (Vonnegut 4),Vonnegut asks of himself in the voice of one Harrison Starr, very early on in the book. His answer is intriguing: “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. And even if [not], there would still be plain old death,” (Vonnegut 4). It seems odd to begin an anti-war novel with an acknowledgement that not only is it impossible to prevent wars, but that even if it was, doing so would not change anything at all, as people would still die anyway. Time and again in war literature, the horror of senseless death is cited as the reason why war must be stopped, yet Vonnegut brushes this aside. This acknowledgement that destroying war won’t fundamentally change anything, coupled with the constant peppering of even the happiest points of Billy Pilgrim’s story arc with the grating refrain of “so it goes,” shows that Vonnegut isn’t really all that excited about anything that happens in life. This point is carried home by the explanation of death by the Tralfmadorians, namely that, “[w]hen a Trafalmadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in many other moments,” (Vonnegut 34), which reduces the ethical culpability of senseless slaughter of the makers of war to absolutely nothing, at least from the effectively-omniscient perspective of ‘cosmic intelligence.’ If all war results in is a lot of people being in a “bad condition,” it does not seem so bad, especially when it is noted that the peak that they reach in all the other moments of their life is merely that of being “just fine;” they are not good, they are not experiencing transports of joy that make up for their being dead at another moment, they are “just fine.” This is not exactly a ringing condemnation of war.  
 Only 34 pages into the novel, the reader must grapple with the idea that the narrator has a blase attitude about almost everything, including war, and that regardless of how much death and destruction happens over the course of the next 240 pages, none of that really matters to his protagonist or the grand scheme of things, which also do not matter. Not even to the mighty Tralfmadorians, who state in no uncertain terms that the universe and everything in it isn’t much worth saving, saying, “we blow [the universe] up, experimenting with fuels...a...pilot presses a starter button and the whole Universe disappears...we *always* let him and we always *will* let him,” (Vonnegut 149). Even if the Tralfmadorians are merely figments of Billy Pilgrim’s deranged and combat-addled imagination, as the lines “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time…[he] says,” (Vonnegut 29) suggest, that fact would make this sentiment the product of his subconscious mind, which does little to counteract the idea that there is no point to anything at all. In this scenario, Billy Pilgrim is little more than a nihilist of convenience, not of philosophy; he decides to be swept through life because life is pointless, and because participating in a pointless endeavor is also pointless. At best, one might argue that Vonnegut crafted the drifting of Billy Pilgrim’s mind up and down the corridors of time as a sort of audience-participation stunt designed to bring the reader to the conclusion that they would very much prefer not to be as aimless and apathetic as Billy Pilgrim, and that if it was the war made him that way then maybe war isn’t such a great idea.

Unfortunately for Vonnegut, even that seems a stretch, considering the fact that Billy Pilgrim is, simply put, utterly and completely *unlikeable*. If he had been crafted in such a way as to garner sympathy from the reader, to develop some kind of personal connection with them, or to evince pity from them, then perhaps the audience-participation argument might have merit, but as he does not, it does not. Billy Pilgrim is but a bumbling chaplain’s assistant, “customarily a figure of fun in the American Army,” (Vonnegut 38), from the start, he personifies an archetype with which the majority of readers would likely rather not be associated. He is clearly not a hero, but over the course of the novel he fails to bring the reader along a path of from rising sympathy, to reluctant self-identification, and ultimately to genuine support which is generally the case in stories featuring an anti-hero[[1]](#footnote-0). His persistent lack of direction, self-esteem, and purpose often make him not just unlikeable but repellent as well, and it is not hard to understand the German surgeon’s reasons for asking of Billy Pilgrim whether he thought “we would enjoy being *mocked*,” (Vonnegut 193). His mere presence and stubborn persistence in being exactly the same from start to finish, for all of eternity, is a mockery of the human condition even at its most vulgar.

If not a hero and not an anti-hero, then what? Billy Pilgrim certainly isn’t a villain, as he has no motives, good or bad. Nor is he a clown, for he is not funny or in the least bit entertaining. What Billy Pilgrim represents is a sort of anti-gestalt, a structure with no properties, a form entirely devoid of attributes. While he is not himself a nihilist, he is the perfect expression of an abstract object, the only object that might possibly exist in a world where metaphysical nihilism is truth in an epistemic sense. An abstract object is “an object which does not exist at any particular time or place, but rather exists as a type of thing, i.e. an...abstraction.”[[2]](#footnote-1) Billy Pilgrim fits this description exactly, he is unstuck in time and place, and as it is the case that “[a]mong the things [he cannot] change [are] the past, the present, and the future,” (Vonnegut 77) he cannot effect change in any way, he is an abstraction of human consciousness seen all at once, from a very Tralfmadorian four-dimensional perspective. Is *Slaughterhouse-Five* an antiwar novel? No. There is no room for morality in a world devoid of meaning, only consequence- cause and effect. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to express this idea in a form suited for consumption by three-dimensional beings living in a four-dimensional world, to paint a picture of the amber in which all moments are trapped (Vonnegut 97). However, if the moments of war have the effect of producing characters such as Billy Pilgrim, it is perhaps best to avoid them at all costs.

1. Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*, or Roland Deschain in *The Dark Tower* for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Abrams, Meyer Howard; Harpham, Geoffrey Galt (2011). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)