Dugan Lentz
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What To Make of a Massacre: Morality and Free Will in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

What is the proper response to senseless violence? It's not an easy question to answer. Kurt Vonnegut didn't think so either, if the eighteen different openings to his popular 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse Five* are anything to go by (Roston, 2021). Nevertheless, it is a question that lingers behind the pages of a novel that pulls no punches when it comes to deglorifying the essence of war.

There's a passage in the first chapter that explains Vonnegut's intention behind constructing the novel the way that he did–splicing together past, present, and future to form a holistic view of a veteran's experience.

> "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.
>
> And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like *"Poo-tee-weet."* (Vonnegut, 22)

Witnessing a horror like the bombing of Dresden makes you question the reality of the universe, because we can't fathom a world where such evils are commonplace and acceptable. Vonnegut experienced the contradictions of war. He witnessed actions both honorable and despicable on both sides, and the deeper contradiction of an act of unspeakable tragedy occurring on behest of the very leaders he's fighting for. This knowledge that he is a part of this cycle of violence shapes the flow of the novel's narrative in a way that honestly reflects his confusion. By utilizing a fragmented style of narrative common in postmodern works, Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse Five is able to convey the nonsensical qualities of war, suggesting that such tragedies render an individual's agency void and moral binaries obsolete.

Fragmentation is a mainstay of postmodernist literature. It is a way of breaking up the single overarching narrative into smaller, less coherent pieces of information that the reader then must put together to make sense of the whole. The first sentence of the aforementioned passage addresses this stylistic choice: "It is so short and jumbled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." In other words, the form has to mirror the content. Billy is a man who doesn't know which way is up anymore. What does it mean to live an ordinary life in the aftermath of a period of destruction that left all semblance of order and reason in its wake? Vonnegut's response is to create a sporadic set of events that deconstruct time itself in order to accommodate Billy's disorientation. The randomness to the novel, the feeling that maybe Vonnegut wrote each scene on an index card, threw them into the air, and then wrote each scene as he picked it up off the floor is alleviated somewhat by the fact that each narrative string is building toward a climax. Billy's time as a soldier advances toward the bombing of Dresden; Billy's life as an optometrist advances toward the death of his wife; his time spent with the Tralfamadorians advances toward Billy's role of enlightening Earth on the true nature of time.

The description of the Tralfamadorian novel is another nod toward the book's structure. "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" (Vonnegut, 82). Taken and examined separately, there probably wouldn't seem to be a particular relationship between *Slaughterhouse Five's* split narratives. After all, what do War War Two, aliens, and a suburban drama have to do with each other? But the short paragraphs and constant switching of narratives brings readers as close as

possible to seeing the book "all at once." Only then do the common themes of individual agency, fate vs. free will, and death become clear.

"There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." What does this mean exactly? A massacre is defined as an "indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people," and intelligence is often measured by someone's ability to learn or understand new situations. So we could restate Vonnegut's assertion by saying: indiscriminate slaughtering of people defies human understanding. Not really a shocking revelation, but why is it that unimaginable acts of evil like the Holocaust disturb us to the core? Many reasons, I'm sure, but one of them probably has something to do with our idea of justice. We want punishment for the guilty and deliverance for the innocent. So what happens when the guilty are delivered and the innocent are punished? For some, it could lead to a distrust in the moral order, or order itself for that matter. Do we live in a world of order, discoverable by reason like the modernists, or do we truly live in a postmodern world dominated by chaos, where truth is fragmented into personal interpretations?

What Billy, and perhaps vicariously Vonnegut, have to think through in the wake of so many senseless deaths is that nature doesn't care about their existence or nonexistence. There's a passage from Stephen Crane's short story, "The Open Boat" that is a good example of this: "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important . . . he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples . . . . Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation" (Crane, 625). When confronted with the knowledge about Germans making soap and candles out of dead Jews, Vonnegut could only reply with: "I know, I know. I *know"* (Vonnetgut, 15). There is a numb acceptance of the knowledge that terrible things happen and that there's nothing he can do to stop them from happening, nothing except maybe write a book.

"Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is except for the birds" (Vonnegut, 22). It seems to me that Vonnegut is saying people generally avoid looking back at tragedies to remember what happened there due to painful memories or disturbing subject matter. This idea is further reinforced near the end of the first chapter when Vonnegut relates the story of Lot's wife looking back at the ruined cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Vonnegut loves that Lot's wife did that because it was "so human." He compares himself to a pillar of salt as he wrote this book, which he described as being a "failure" as a result of his willingness to look back. I think it's odd for him to say "people aren't supposed to look back" on events like Dresden when *Slaughterhouse Five* is essentially an anti-war novel written as a protest against the John Wayne heroics commonplace in war stories up to that time.

There's a criminally underappreciated HBO show called The Leftovers that appropriately mirrors the issues discussed here. In the show, two percent of the world's population has disappeared without a trace. Three years later and there's a group called the Guilty Remnant who dub themselves 'living reminders' of the Departure. After such a random supernatural event, they believe the world to be meaningless and aim to spread their nihilism to all those who hope to move on with their lives, those who choose not to look back. The only remedy for pain, they argue, is to stop caring about life and meaning. Is it possible that Vonnegut was a 'living reminder' of the horrors he witnessed in order to keep people from glorifying war in the future? Vonnegut isn't ignorant to the fact that war in some form or another is a part of life, "as easy to stop as glaciers," so in some sense his book really was a failure. No matter how many living reminders there are, the same problem of human nature persists. If we do have agency as individuals, then this is something we can take into consideration as we build our individual

lives. But if we're completely controlled by fate as Vonnegut suggests, if life has no inherent meaning, then pain is probably all we're going to feel.

The dichotomy of predestination and free will is obviously a major theme throughout the book. Although the validity of individual agency isn't directly discussed in this paper's central passage, it's important to highlight if we're to more closely examine the proper response to senseless violence.

Slaughterhouse Five's concept is one of predestination. Billy cannot control when or where he travels in time. He has witnessed his birth and his death; nothing he does will change anything that happens in the middle. The Tralfamadorians tell Billy that one of their test pilots is responsible for destroying the universe. When Billy asks if they can prevent it from ever happening, the aliens say: "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way (Vonnegut, 106). In other words, nothing Billy can do will stop the bombing of Dresden (or any other war for that matter) because he is "trapped in the amber of this moment" (Vonnegut, 72). Billy asks "why me" in regards to being 'chosen' to visit the alien planet. But why not? As the Tralfamadorians say, "Why anything?" According to them, only earthlings speak about free will, earthlings who are beholden to cause and effect.

Vonnegut's famous refrain, "so it goes," emphasizes the inevitability of death. It acts like the postscript to every mention of demise. It doesn't matter whether he's addressing the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Frenchman who died in prison after attempting to sell a lewd picture, or Edgar Derby's murder by firing squad after standing up to the American Nazi Howard Campbell. Not once does Vonnegut assign labels like hero or

villain. This was actually something he promised his friend's wife Mary: "There won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne" (Vonnegut, 19).

So let's bring this together. If free will is out of the picture, if no one has agency, then logically, morality ceases to exist. How can there be such a thing as a good or bad person if we have no control over our actions? For morality to exist, there must be a moral standard, and then people have to have the ability to meet or miss that standard on their own accord. They have to believe that their actions have consequences.

So why does the bombing of Dresden bother Vonnegut so greatly if life is ultimately meaningless and free will doesn't exist? He responded to senseless violence by writing a book meant to condemn a war where good and bad doesn't exist. No white or black, just lots of gray. People die; death is inevitable; so it goes. Again, a possible reason for Vonnegut's distress at the heavy loss of innocent life is a feeling of injustice on behalf of the dead. Or maybe he feels guilty for his association with the side that perpetrated the bombing. In any case, these ideas of justice and guilt only hold water if there's an inherent moral order at play here, something that informs the turmoil of conscience. So perhaps Vonnegut thinks there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre because he can't reconcile his emotions with his philosophy.

War is a terrible thing. There is nothing good about war; it is a symptom of a much larger issue with human nature. Yes, terrible things happen, yes innocent people die needlessly, but the very fact that there is no material explanation for the evil implies that there has to be some sort of moral framework that informs our guilt and our suffering. So what is the proper response to senseless violence? I'm not sure I have an answer. But I believe that people have choices, and that those choices have consequences. And when we see the disastrous results of certain collective choices, like the Holocaust or the Great Terror, the only conclusion I can draw is that

good and evil exist, and that we have the ability to suppress, ignore, conflate, uplift (and so on) these realities in order to meet our desired ends.

Works Cited

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