

"slaughterhouse 5" by vonnegut essay sample

War



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“ Slaughterhouse 5” by Vonnegut Essay Sample

Vonnegut wrote “ Slaughterhouse 5” in 1969. It is a mixed genre of sci-fi and war. Vonnegut wrote it to show people the ‘ American dream’ as being false and not having real value, only materialistic value. The question is asking whether Slaughterhouse 5 is depressing or optimistic and humorous, or maybe it is just sad but the humorous manner makes it feel optimistic.

Just by looking at the title ‘ Slaughterhouse 5’, the idea of a place where things got killed is gruesome and depressing, but this title is also a pun because it is meant to have another meaning. If you take away the ‘ S’ of ‘ Slaughterhouse 5’ it is ‘ laughterhouse 5’ which gives the book an entertaining, optimistic look.

Vonnegut uses this war story book as an anti war-book. He uses the way in which Billy jumps from one stage of his life to another, uncontrollably, ‘ Billy is spastic in time’ to represent how chaotic war was. He shows how people think of war as being great, manly and herotic:

‘ “ You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs”[...] And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies. ‘

This quotation criticises the way in which wars are glorified and encouraged by films. This is saying that people think that people with guns and war machinery are really manly like in films but underneath this front they are

really like weak little babies! It is also saying that men shouldn't act like babies and fight to sort things out, but should sort things out in a civilised adult manner. It is saying that the people who go off to fight are too young. Billy says that the nicest people were the people who really knew about war:

' The nicest veterans in Schenectady, I thought, the kindest and the funniest ones, the ones who hated war the most were the ones who'd really fought'

This is sad and depressing because this is saying that people who didn't fight in the war didn't know what war was really like and how horrible it is and how it is the complete opposite of the way Americans glorify it.

In the Vietnam war most of the soldiers and military officials supported the idea of just dumping tens of thousands of bombs and napalm. ' he was in favour of bombing north Vietnam back to the stone age'; the Major of the Lions Club expresses this view. Several times, even though Billy Pilgrim knows the true horrors of bombing and war and is against the killing, he chooses to ignore it and get on with his life. This shows how many Americans look for easy way out of things and don't bother to really think things over and show their true feelings.

Vonnegut shows how Americans are so easily persuaded to think something that would usually be considered completely stupid or crazy. The three musketeers; Roland Weary and the two scouts thought they could easily take on the whole German army and win on their own! This shows us how Americans don't think for themselves but let themselves be indoctrinated into thinking war is something that it isn't.

Vonnegut shows that Americans are too fascinated with war, torture, death and guns; he uses Roland Weary to present this. Throughout the book, each time Weary comes up, he is always talking or thinking of how to kill people and methods of torture. He is always talking about his father's torture instrument collection, but the fact is American like Weary's father, are too possessive and scared to use them. They only use them to 'brag' to other people about this. Although this is horrible, none of this is Weary's fault, it is really his mother's and father's fault for making him so obsessed and 'wrapping' him up. This another sick, depressing downside of American culture.

Roland talks about his father's ridiculous obsession of torture instruments and killing:

'He told them about his father's collection of guns and swords and torture instruments and leg irons and so on. Weary's father, who was a plumber, actually did collect such things, and his collection was insured for them for four thousand dollars. He wasn't alone. He belonged to a big club of people who collected things like that.'

In the first sentence Vonnegut uses 'and' four times which creates an ironic excitement. He uses the 'Bathos' technique which creates an excitement about his collection, but then we find out he is a plumber, which after all the excitement sounds rather dull and stupid. The fact that he insured these for four thousand dollars shows that this was the only thing he really cared about and it is ironic thinking that anybody would want to take these! In the last sentence the words 'big' and 'things' make Weary's father sound

childlike, stupid and simple. It shows that Americans are weak without their tools. This whole paragraph is satirising and is mocking to change. I think it is very successful in making this subtle through using complex techniques.

Most of the characters in this book have some sort of association with guns: Billy's father died in a shooting accident, Paul Lazzaro threatened to kill everyone he met, a woman called Rosewater had shot a fireman mistaking him as a German soldier. Although Vonnegut does not always show these deaths as depressing, he shows them as farcical deaths. This is attacking on American culture, how guns can on lead to one thing: death.

This killing, torture and weapons, we know is depressing but in the book, you don't notice this because Vonnegut uses a jokey style here and makes the depressing facts very subtle manner. The story seems optimistic and funny but these depressing facts are still there without you knowing it.

Another aspect of American culture is Vonnegut's attack on materialism. An example of this is how everything has to be related to commercial products, even people:

' He was a funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth - tall and weak and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola.'

Billy Pilgrim was an odd looking person who resembled this commercial product, Coca-Cola. This simile shows how American even have to associate their life with commercial objects to describe how people look!

Another example of this is:

' There was a soft drink bottle on the windowsill. Its label boasted that it contained no nourishment whatsoever.'

Which is ironic because commercial products normally try to boast how good they are for you but really aren't.

Another genre Vonnegut uses is science fiction. He uses this extensively to make death less shocking, Billy uses this to escape the trauma of the Dredson bombing and his problems. Trying to pretend your in a different universe could be just going crazy but Billy like many Americans think of something else to escape their problems. Billy gets taken by the Tralfamodrians to a planet millions of miles away to teach him about life. They say that life shouldn't be linear. If you're dead at one time or if something bad happens it doesn't matter because you are alive and well some time else. They teach him to only look at the good parts of life and put parts out of his mind. This is what allows him to cope with all the death he witnesses, thus the saying ' so it goes'. This shows that Americans are so credible that they would believe in things such as science fiction where there is no death to get away from the reality.

I think that this book has many sad and depressing and even shocking aspects of American society and human life but it gets across these issues in a rather more optimistic way in a funny, jokey manner. The overall plot of the book is depressing, but alerts you to the problems in a digestible making you want to do something about them. Vonnegut mocks and criticises war to change the way think about war and the way American culture behaves using satire, which is used many times in this book to put across this point.