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Article

“There Is No Good War”: The Firebombing of Dresden and Kurt Vonnegut’s View Towards World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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A B S T R A C T

This study discusses Kurt Vonnegut's view of war reflected in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and also his efforts in conveying his views through his novel. This novel is based on the experience of Kurt Vonnegut during World War II when he was imprisoned in a German city called Dresden and witnessed the destruction of the city on February 13, 1945 in an Allied bombing operation. In the novel, Vonnegut rewrote his experience in the form of a fiction. In discussing this literary work, I used the expressive theory by M. H. Abrams which was supported by a historical and biographical approach. In analyzing this literary work, I took quotes from the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the main data as well as other data as secondary data, such as the biography of the author, interviews with the author taken from various sources, as well as writings on author that is relevant to the discussion in this study. The result show that Kurt Vonnegut see war as something that was completely meaningless and only caused destruction and death for innocent residents. Kurt Vonnegut uses narrative techniques such as black humor, irony, and metaphysics at *Slaughterhouse-Five* so that his views on war can be conveyed to his readers.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the ways for veterans to express their feelings and view regarding their experience during war. Many veterans have written books about their experience during war in the form of memoir and fiction [1]. Kurt Vonnegut was one of the World War II veterans who had written his experience about World War II, especially about the firebombing of Dresden. Through *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut shares his experience regarding the meaningless destruction of Dresden and the glorified depiction of war that overshadowed such atrocity—these two things mostly shaped his view towards war [2].

Kurt Vonnegut had served in the United States Army and fought during the Battle of the Bulge. He was also captured by the Germans and later interned in Dresden. During his time in Dresden, Vonnegut witnesses the Allies' firebombing of the city, which changed the way he viewed war. Vonnegut considered this bombing raid as an atrocity and as the result he opposed US' involvement in the future wars and rejected the depiction of World War II as a —good war in the media.

In the United States, World War II has great impact on literature. The soldiers that served during World War II were mostly referred as war heroes'. This portrayal of soldiers as war heroes' were later reinforced through books and films—most notably through John Wayne's films such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Flying Tigers*, *Operation Pacific*, *They Were Expendable* (based on William L. White's book), and *The Longest Day* (based on Cornelius Ryan's book). These books and films not only served as a tribute towards the soldiers that have fought during World War II, but also were used by the government to encourage the youth to enlist in military. Michael Salevouris explains that books and films about war are effective to encourage young people to enlist (Salevouris 342). During World War II, US Government used books, films, cartoon, and poster as propaganda. According to the National WWII Museum, from the period of 1942 to 1945, the United States' armed force saw surge of enlistments in all branches. About 38.8% (6,332,000) of its servicemen were volunteers while the others 61.2% (about 11,535,000) were draftees (—Research Starters US Military).

In this research, I would like to analyze the reflection of Kurt Vonnegut's view towards war in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the conveyance of his view in the novel. This research is significant to uncover how a historical event and personal experience influence author's perspective regarding an issue. In this case, I argue that Kurt Vonnegut's experience as a prisoner-of-war who witnessed the destruction of Dresden in the hands of Allies bombers influenced his view towards United States involvement in future wars and the depiction of war in books and films.

The main objectives in this article would be to analyze Kurt Vonnegut's view towards war as reflected in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and to find out how Kurt Vonnegut deliver his view towards war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Expressive Theory

Expressive theories view a work of art in relation with its author. This orientation' of critical theories regarded literary as the reflection of the author himself because it conveys the author's feelings, thoughts, and view about certain event or situation in the society that affects him. In this research, I would apply expressive theory in order to find out the idea and view of Kurt Vonnegut, which is conveyed in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. According to Abrams, expressive theory can be defined as a theory that —holds the object of the artist to be the expression of the artist's systems of emotions, impressions, or beliefs, (22). This means that expressive theory sees a literary work as the expression of the author's point of view, emotion and society that shape the author itself. Through this theory, I would trace the background behind the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and find out Kurt Vonnegut's view regarded war with the firebombing of Dresden as the center of this research.

Historical-Biographical Approach

Historical-biographical approach is a merge between two approach—historical criticism and biographical criticism. Wilfred L. Guerin in his book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* states that historical-biographical approach sees a literary work —chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author’s life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work, (51). Its main goal was to provide context for literary works in relation to the author’s life and his or her historical period.

Historical-biographical approach views a literary work in relation with the author’s life and times. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature* states that the —most obvious cause of a work of art is the author (78) [3]. It means that author has an important role in shaping a work of art. Historical-biographical approach is the oldest and well-established method in literary study. The application of this approach towards literary works could be traced back into the Renaissance era, specifically through Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*. Kelley Griffith states that historical approach is a method of studying literature by —period of movement, which mean that in order to analyze how a literary work correspondent with the history, we should compare the novel with the factual data from historical sources [4].

Since one of the points to be discussed in this thesis is how Vonnegut conveyed his view regarding war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I feel the need to uncover the narrative techniques that he employed in the novel and explain the implications behind those techniques towards the conveyance of his view. Monica Loeb explains that Kurt Vonnegut deliberately adjust his writing style in order to get his message across towards his readers [5]. Therefore, based on this fact, I believe that it is relevant to analyze the implications behind the narrative techniques that Vonnegut used in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in order to understand his intention as an author who experienced war and witnessed the firebombing of Dresden first-hand. To elaborate this, I would refer to theorist Hayden White who states: —Histories never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that liken the events reported in them to some form which we have already become familiar in our literary culture [...] By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure, [6].

In this respect, the consideration of figures and tropes, a critical awareness of the rhetorical elements of language and so on—the strategies and tools of critical analysis—are as appropriate to a critical study of history as they are to literary studies [7].

METHOD

In collecting the data, I will take it from two sources, primary data and secondary data. Here, I would take the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut as the primary data. For secondary data, this research would use some of the written materials like books concerning the topic, literature books, journal articles, and information from websites.

In analyzing the data, I would read the novel extensively in order to find specific information regarding the topic being analyzed. After that, I will identify how the firebombing of Dresden depicted in this novel and compare it to the historical records. After that, I would apply expressive theory proposed by M. H. Abrams [8] and analyze the novel through historical-biographical approach in order to find out how the firebombing of Dresden influences Vonnegut's view towards war in the novel.

In presenting the data, I will use the qualitative method, which, according to Steven J. Taylor in the book titled *Introduction to Qualitative Research Method*, —qualitative research attempts to broaden and/or deepen our understanding of how things came to be the way they are in our social world [9]. It proves the analysis by emerging arguments and opinion since the data are words, statements or paragraph and not in form of number.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using historical-biographical approach, it appears that the firebombing of Dresden has a great impact on shaping Kurt Vonnegut's view towards war. There are two important factors that shape Vonnegut's view towards war. They are the justification towards the use of strategic bombing and the glorification of World War II in media. Vonnegut viewed the death of innocent civilians in Dresden resulted from the bombing raid is unjustified. He also rejected the idea of a good war and criticized the romanticization of World War II as a —good war in books and films. Initially, Kurt Vonnegut believed that the Allies fought on the right side while the Axis fought on the wrong side. He acknowledges the motives why the United States should participate in the war and towards what end it should be accomplished (*Armageddon in Retrospect* 28). However, after learning about the secrecy behind the bombing raid and the catastrophe it resulted, Vonnegut finally realized the meaninglessness of war and as the consequence tarnished the reason why he should fight in the first place.

In order to convey the meaninglessness of war and his rejection towards the idea of a good war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut applied several narrative techniques such as black humor, irony, and metafiction. Kurt Vonnegut also conveyed his view towards war through motifs, specifically death and children, which played important roles in the novel. Vonnegut did this in order to get his message across towards his readers.

Black Humor

Black humor is Kurt Vonnegut's response towards the meaninglessness of war and the fact that he couldn't prevent the firebombing of Dresden. However, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses black humor in order to help the readers relate with the horrors he had seen during war. Vonnegut wrote his experience regarding the deaths and destruction resulted from the bombing raid in a way that makes the readers laugh instead of cry, telling them —this is happened, more or less and there's nothing they could do about it, so it goes. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's use of black humor could be seen in several instances such as when Billy, who was drunk, tried to find his steering wheel (59). In this instance, Vonnegut wrote in a manner that makes the scene looked funny, such as how Billy —wind milled his hands, hoping to find it by luck (59), and when he knew that didn't work, he then worked his way towards the steer, so

that the steer —could not possibly escape him (59). In the end, Vonnegut finally told the readers the reason why Billy can't find the steer is that he was —in the back seat of his car (59). Notice that after Vonnegut humorously wrote how Billy was —still angered by the stolen steering wheel, the story jumped back into World War II, when Billy was being shaken by Roland Weary, right before they were captured by the German and the scouts accompanied them were being executed (60-61). This was Vonnegut way to prepare the readers about the things that would follow. Vonnegut humorous depiction of a drunken Billy Pilgrim is just a way to mask what lies beneath it.

Irony

Kurt Vonnegut used irony in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in order to “deglorify” and “undramatized” the depiction of war. Vonnegut does this as a form of opposition towards books and films that romanticizing the pictures of war.

Vonnegut's deglorification' and undramatization' of war could be seen in some instances in the novel. One of the instances could be seen in characterization of Billy Pilgrim, which characterized as a person who —has no control over where he is going next (29) and in a —constant state of fright (29) resulted from his experience of —unstuck in time (28). Billy Pilgrim's characterization was Vonnegut's way to show that war was fought by —babies instead of —men. Billy was portrayed as a hopeless and innocent child who has no control over himself

and let everything around him dictate what he must do. In war, a person like Billy shouldn't have survived considering how Billy is —unenthusiastic about living (77) and —wouldn't do anything to save himself (43). Yet, Billy survived through it all; first from being separated from his doomed unit (42), to being captured by the German (63-66), from riding a train full of prisoner inside a tight, windowless boxcar (84-88), up to being caught in the firebombing of Dresden and its aftermath (227-230). Billy's survival, although could be considered as luck, is an irony in itself. One of the greatest ironies in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is how a passive and hopeless person such as Billy Pilgrim should not be the one that would survive destruction as massive as Dresden. By making a person like him survived in World War II, Vonnegut already deglorifies' the depiction of a soldier in his novel.

Metafiction

Vonnegut's use of metafiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five* was the fact that he cannot really depict historical events, such as the firebombing of Dresden, objectively as it really was due to the influence of his own perception towards the event that would resulted in biased narration. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut keeps reminding the readers that they were reading a fictional work and events regarding the firebombing of Dresden that happened in the novel were fictionalized. Kurt Vonnegut wrote in a way that makes him as if he was part of the fiction. Vonnegut did this because he didn't want to place himself as the —omniscient creator in the novel, as suggested by Todd F. Davis, but rather as a person who is —wrestling with the big question at hand, (7).

Through the opening paragraph, Vonnegut fictionalized his own account regarding the firebombing of Dresden, which is important to establish the plot later on for the novel. By using himself as one of the character in the novel, Vonnegut blatantly made the metafictional nature of *Slaughterhouse-Five* obvious. Directly, after Vonnegut open his story, he explained the difficulties he faced during the writing of the novel and pointed out what —this lousy little book (2) cost him in —money and anxiety and time (2). Vonnegut also claimed in the novel that his war book was a failure, because it was written by —a pillar of salt, a reference towards the event of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Bible that Vonnegut quoted in the first chapter. From the opening paragraph in chapter 1, Vonnegut wrote in a way that the narrator comes as if he was part of the novel. It's true, since later in the story, Vonnegut once again intrudes into the story, which is apparent in chapter 5 where Billy went to the latrine (156) and later in chapter 10 when he mentioned about the deaths of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King (268).

Motifs

a. Children

Children were an important motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As stated previously, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the characters were portrayed as babies' instead of men'. This is Vonnegut's way to say that in reality, war was fought mostly by young men instead of John Wayne's portrayal of military serviceman. This kind of portrayal is necessary in order to break the impression of American soldiers as a heroic, noble, and masculine figure based on John Wayne's films.

b. Death

Death is also an important motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It was embodied by the phrase —so it goes, which was repeated throughout the novel. This phrase signified the acceptance of death in the novel, but behind it, there's an implication regarding that acceptance. In the beginning of the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut already established that there's no way we could stop war, saying how wars were —as easy to stop as glaciers (4), and even if wars aren't as frequent as it seems, —there would still plain old death, (4). In this way, Vonnegut try to let his readers know that war is closely related with death. However, by pointing out the commonality between war and death, Vonnegut not only provide a viewpoint for his readers to understand about the issues in his novel, but also allowed him to convey it in such an attitude that embodied —acceptance, sorrow, humor, [and] outrage as noted by Allen (qtd. in Bloom 13).

After analyzing the narrative techniques used in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and how Kurt Vonnegut used those techniques to convey his view towards war, we could see that Vonnegut put many efforts to put his experience regarding the firebombing of Dresden into words. Vonnegut asserted that ideas are important and to communicate those ideas with the readers were vital for literary art (Davis 45). In order to make his readers understand the —meaninglessness of war that he felt after witnessed the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut had to deviate from traditional narrative style so his message could get across towards his readers.

CONCLUSIONS

After reading and analyzing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I conclude that Vonnegut viewed war as meaningless and rejected World War II status as a —good war. His view particularly related to the firebombing of Dresden that claimed thousands of innocent lives and destroy the beautiful city of Dresden. His experience as the witness of the firebombing of Dresden prompted Vonnegut to criticize the use of strategic bombing against civilians. Kurt Vonnegut also writes *Slaughterhouse-Five* to criticize the glorified depiction of World War II in books and films. Vonnegut felt that he needed to tell the brutality he had seen during the war—namely, the firebombing of Dresden—to break the illusion of World War II as —good war in the eye of American people.

Slaughterhouse-Five signified Vonnegut's view about the —meaninglessness of war, which was resulted from his experience of witnessing the firebombing of Dresden. In order to make his readers understand his view, Vonnegut adjusted his writing style so his messages could get across. The narrative techniques that Vonnegut used in the novel not only served as to make the story more unique and different, but also required in order to convey his view towards war, which couldn't be achieved using traditional narrative techniques. By using black humor in the novel, Vonnegut aimed to distort the romantic depiction of war. It was also Vonnegut's response towards the fact that he couldn't do anything to prevent the firebombing of Dresden. By employing irony in the novel, Vonnegut deglorified' and undramatized' the depiction of war. Metafiction serves as reminder towards the readers that despite *Slaughterhouse-Five* was a work of fiction, it still based on Vonnegut's own experience of witnessing the firebombing of Dresden, so they could get the idea about what Vonnegut's felt regarding the bombing raid and why it contributed towards his view about war.

Finally, from reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut hopes that his readers could become —agents of change for a better world. Vonnegut put many efforts in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* so that his view regarding war and what he felt towards the firebombing of Dresden could reach his readers. Vonnegut's resignation in —so it goes was the fact that he couldn't change what had been happened. Despite its initial setbacks and problems during writing of the novel, Vonnegut finally accomplished his work. For many, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was still considered as one of the influential novel.

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