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Rebecca Hoevenaar
rhoeven@bgsu.edu

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KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*: MAKING THE PAST PRESENT

REBECCA HOEVENAAR

HONORS PROJECT

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Lawrence Coates, Department of English, Advisor

Beth Griech-Pollele, Department of History, Advisor

I.

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* has maintained popularity since its publication in 1969. When the novel first came out it was read by young students who were caught up in the peace movements of the 1960's. This moment in time was crucial to the novel's success because this was at the height of the Vietnam War. Vonnegut brought up a past event, the fire-bombing of Dresden, and made it present in the minds of young activists. The novel is the story of Billy Pilgrim, a former World War II soldier, who becomes unstuck in time. He continues to jump through time to different moments of his life. The story is semi-autobiographical because Vonnegut uses his own experiences in war to tell Billy Pilgrim's story, especially the firebombing of Dresden. *Slaughterhouse-Five* continues its popularity and relevance in our contemporary world due to its subject and message. It is a protest novel against senseless acts of violence yet also acknowledges that these horrors will always continue to happen. In 2003, the United States made the decision to invade Iraq, sparking a violent conflict that has cost too many lives. Bombing strategies were used to capture the capital Baghdad; this makes a clear connection with the extensive bombing done over Vietnam and the air raid on Dresden. Each of these events sacrificed many civilians in the name of freedom and victory.

Vonnegut's novel plays an important role in drawing parallels between these acts of horror. *Slaughterhouse-Five* first took the destruction of Dresden and placed it in the minds of Americans protesting the Vietnam War. The similarities were clear; both instances involved excessive bombing and the sacrifice of civilians. Additionally, the government worked to hide the reality of what was happening in war. Distrust of the government is an important part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* because it was a shock to citizens that the American government would try

to hide something from the people. This distrust continued after the war and was very prevalent in the Vietnam protests.

Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* today, one will see the same parallels between Dresden and more recent violent conflicts. Civilians continue to be sacrificed for the war effort and the government continues to attempt to hide the reality. Readers can see that these events have happened in the past and that they will continue to happen. The best that anyone can do is to protest and actively not support future violence. This is the pacifist message that is present in the novel and that carries through time.

As a work of literature, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has the power to draw on past events and make them relevant years later. Vonnegut talks about Dresden and makes it present in the minds of any generation of readers. This is the power that art has to make past events present and give them meaning in our contemporary world.

II. Dresden

The events at Dresden remain a tragedy for the refugees who were sacrificed and for the cultural artifacts of the city. While this was certainly a devastating bombing campaign, it was not made known to the general American public until after the war was over. This was not the first time the Allied powers had conducted secretive bombing raids. Notably, there were attacks on Japan that delivered even more damage. For military leaders, Dresden was just another city to be destroyed in the name of the war effort. Tami Biddle writes in “Sifting Dresden’s Ashes” that what sets Dresden apart is: “that an erosion of moral sensibilities had cleared the way for attacks on a city the Americans and the British knew was swollen with refugees” (63). While other Allied bombing campaigns caused larger damage, the events surrounding Dresden and

what led to its destruction stand out. The “brutalizing and corrosive effects of war” are clearly seen with this event (Biddle 63). The long, difficult years of war produced a decline of morality and an attitude of indifference which subsequently allowed a city of people to be destroyed in a firestorm.

When planning the attack, the Allies selected Dresden along with Berlin and Leipzig as targets. These cities were placed as second-priority, taking the place of attacks on communications. The bombing would serve two purposes; first, to aid the Soviet advance and second, “to hinder the German army’s ability to fight a war of maneuver by causing chaos behind its lines” (Biddle 65). Here, Biddle notes that this decision marks a shift in the use of strategic bombers. She says: “Enjoining bombers to ‘cause great confusion’ and ‘hamper movement of reinforcements’ allowed planners to elide the actual meaning – in human terms – of those phrases, creating a space in which moral dilemmas could be avoided” (65). It was a way to use refugees to distract German supplies and efforts away from the fighting. By disguising their true intents with language, the Allied planners could avoid questions of morality with their strategy. If the issue is not directly stated, it is easy to evade a discussion of ethics. Biddle also credits long years of war to the new attitude adopted by the Allies. As war dragged on, people became numb to its atrocities and violence. To demonstrate this, she describes a 1939 appeal by Roosevelt for every government engaged in war to not attack civilians or unarmed cities. This was agreed to by the French, British, and the Germans who were the first to break this promise. By 1945, the entire agreement had fallen apart and was forgotten.

The U.S. and Britain attack of Dresden lasted from February 13-15, 1945. Bombs, many of them incendiaries, were dropped all over the city and created a firestorm which rapidly spread. Germans were ill-equipped to battle the fire and “the city smoldered for weeks” (Biddle 62).

Kurt Vonnegut experienced and survived this event as a refugee housed in an underground building. As a soldier, he was captured at the Battle of the Bulge, a loss for the U.S. From there, the captive soldiers were sent in boxcars to a prison camp south of Dresden. Then, because prisoners were required to work for their keep, Vonnegut was sent into the city to work in a malt-syrup factory. He remembers being able to hear other cities being bombed and describes his experience:

We never expected to get it. There were very few air-raid shelters in town and no war industries, just cigarette factories, hospitals, clarinet factories. Then a siren went off—it was February 13, 1945—and we went down two stories under the pavement into a big meat locker. It was cool there, with cadavers hanging all around. When we came up the city was gone. (Paris Review)

When he came up from underground, the leading German officers did not know what to do. Being native to Dresden, they were at a loss of what to do next. A feeling of shock and uncertainty is likely the reaction of anyone lucky enough to survive. The firestorm wiped out an entire city, a home to many German citizens.

Soon after, Vonnegut and the other prisoners are given the task of collecting dead bodies. Vonnegut describes in an interview: “Every day we walked into the city and dug into basements and shelters to get the corpses out, as a sanitary measure. When we went into them, a typical shelter, an ordinary basement usually, looked like a streetcar full of people who’d simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead” (Paris Review). Here, Vonnegut reveals how civilians were unprepared for an attack because they never expected one to happen. Biddle writes: “With the Dresden raid, the British and Americans used the presence of vulnerable civilians to try to hasten a military outcome” (76). They were vulnerable, sitting at

home, enjoying their day, and they were used by the Allies as pawns in war. Due to prolonged warfare, “the issue of noncombatant immunity was never re-evaluated in a serious institutional way” (Biddle 76). This allowed the sacrifice of civilians and refugees to be justified and enacted without serious consideration.

When he arrived home from World War Two, Vonnegut thought it would be easy to write a book on what he had witnessed (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 2). He thought he could just report the facts but really he does not know what to say about Dresden. In the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* he says that his book came out “jumbled and jangled...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” (24). However, Vonnegut is not remaining quiet, he has chosen to look back on time and bring it to the present day. He cites the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot’s wife looks back on her burning city and is turned into a pillar of salt. “People aren’t supposed to look back” but Vonnegut loves her for doing so “because it was so human” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 28). Vonnegut says that his book is a mess because it was written by a pillar of salt; he is looking back on an event that is supposed to be forgotten about.

As he was struggling to write the book, Vonnegut says: “It wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn’t know that, either. There hadn’t been much publicity” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 12). As the Vietnam War came into being, this would change; people would hearken back to Dresden in debates of war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* deserves credit for bringing this past event into the minds of young people of the Vietnam era. Biddle writes that “it etched the raid into the consciousness of a new and highly skeptical generation of Americans” (80). *Slaughterhouse-*

Five serves as a witness to the reality of Dresden and made this event relevant in the minds of Vietnam-era Americans.

III. Vietnam

Vonnegut's novel was published 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, amid peace protests and rapidly evolving negative attitudes toward the government. The war lasted for Americans from 1965-1975 with the goal of preventing the spread of communism.

A primary reason for the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* was the way audiences identified with the message. Similarities were drawn between the Dresden bombing and the senseless attacks on the Vietnamese people. Americans saw how their government had secretly bombed civilians in the past. This was also a time of distrust between Americans and the government. Many people did not agree with the strategy and actions in the war. Unlike Dresden, civilians had more access to information about what was happening. For example, the television brought the war directly into households, making it an issue on everyone's mind. It was more difficult for the government to maintain a façade of righteousness when people were eager to uncover the secrets. American citizens did not trust their government to tell the truth and admit to the horrors of war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a place among the American people who are struggling to decide what to do with their shaken trust in the government. Vonnegut's novel tries to make sense of the shock and confusion by speaking about Dresden. He makes this past issue relevant to readers who identify with Vonnegut's pacifist message. Through *Slaughterhouse-Five*, people are encouraged to make a statement and protest against senseless acts of horror.

Vonnegut speaks of the lasting impression of this experience and says it was “a moment of truth” because Americans did not know their government was partaking in such bombing campaigns (Paris Review). In an interview he explains: “we felt our Government was a respecter of life...And then they lied about it” (Playboy). The confusion and uncertainty many people felt after learning about the destruction of Dresden contributed to Vonnegut’s difficulty in writing about the event. How was he to explain a senseless act from the trusted American government? For Vonnegut, it must have seemed like Dresden was happening all over again in Vietnam (Allen 92). What would become *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut’s attempt to “bridge ‘the increasing gap between the horrors of life in the twentieth century and our imaginative ability to comprehend their full actuality’” (Allen 80).

In another interview with Israel Shenker, Shenker says that Vonnegut “lights the path of despair.” He is “a guru for the young – or for anyone else reluctant to embrace the future or to accept the past” (“Lights Comic Paths”). Vonnegut encourages people to move forward despite the destruction that has happened. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he acknowledges that Dresden happened and encourages others to accept what has happened in the past. But he does not want anyone to remain silent when similar events come along. Vonnegut wants people to protest against what they believe to be wrong and to move forward into the future with the goal of preventing acts of horror. Another element of Vonnegut’s writing is his belief that writers should serve as “agents of change” (Playboy). Of this, Vonnegut says that writers are “expressions of the entire society...And when a society is in great danger, we’re likely to sound the alarms” (Playboy). He claims that in the case of Vietnam, writers alerted the public to what would happen but nobody listened. Writers are the ones who enact social change and send up a warning when society is going the wrong direction. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel that makes a

statement of social protest and reflects Vonnegut's belief that writing should alert readers to issues of concern.

When considering the damage done to Vietnam, the data collected by Edward Miguel and Gérard Roland proves that Vietnam suffered worse at the hands of the Americans than the Axis countries did in all of WWII. The tonnage of bombs dropped during the Vietnam War far exceeds that in WWII. Approximately 6,162,000 tons of bombs were released on Indochina and 1,500,000 on Southeast Asia in the years of 1964-1973 while WWII saw 2,150,000 tons (Miguel and Roland 2). Miguel and Roland state: "Vietnam War bombing thus represented at least three times as much (by weight) as both European and Pacific theater World War II bombing combined, and about 15 times total tonnage in the Korean War" (2). They also claim that "U.S. bombing in Indochina represents roughly 100 times the combined impact of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs" (2). Looking at this data, it is obvious that the American military used bombs more freely in the Vietnam War. Improved technology of planes and bombs, along with newer strategies, likely contributed to this increase.

Like Dresden, there was a common dehumanization of the enemy and all Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese were seen as an enemy that needed to be killed not as humans with families and futures. This made it easier for military leaders to go through with extensive bombing and destruction. It also eased the guilt on the minds of soldiers who had to attack these people personally. Vonnegut says: "Unfortunately, military successes are seen as proof of moral or racial superiority. The other people – by virtue of not being bulletproof – will not be permitted to reproduce" ("Lights Comic Paths"). The Vietnamese were made out to be the Other, outsiders who did not possess human qualities or emotions. This makes it easy for military leaders to escape morally questionable decisions and feelings of guilt. And because the Vietnamese were

lesser, it was the Americans job to go in and enforce racial superiority. Dehumanization of the enemy is a common element of war and contributes to the allowance of tragedies to occur.

IV. Iraq

Vonnegut's novel continues to have relevance in our contemporary society.

Slaughterhouse-Five has the ability to make the past event of Dresden important amidst today's wars. Jerome Klinkowitz writes in his work *Kurt Vonnegut's America* of the way Vonnegut stayed active in his later years. He continued to reach out to young people and encouraged them to have a strong sense of humanity (124). His dedication to sending a message was shown in his 2005 publication of *A Man without a Country*. Suddenly, young people are reading the same author that many of their parents did. When 9/11 happened, Vonnegut was outraged but he was made even more furious by the situation in Iraq. Klinkowitz says that "what upset him the most was how just thinking about [the war] in rational terms was now deeply frowned upon, if not forbidden" (125). Public media is quick to assume that the enemy is simply crazy while Vonnegut identifies with them as human beings. He is critical of the close-minded approach many people have taken in the war. When military leaders and the public media collectively dehumanize the enemy it is easy to bomb and destroy them without any moral crisis. A similar situation is what allowed Dresden to occur.

In studies on civilians in wartime, Adam Roberts argues that the civilian has always been involved in war and "has often been seen as part of the total war effort" (15). In contemporary wars, the soldier and the civilian have become interchangeable. Civilians are allowed to be sacrificed for the war effort. The bombings of Dresden and in Vietnam saw large civilian casualties. In both cases, the deaths were justified in the name of victory. Civilians were

sacrificed without much thought to the moral complications of such an act. In the midst of war, it is easy to forget that the enemy is merely human.

The decision to become involved in Iraq was met with widespread antiwar sentiment. Millions of people flooded the streets of New York City in opposition to the war and President Bush was advised to ignore the people and continue as planned (“Threats and Responses”). Senator John McCain said “that it was ‘foolish’ for people to protest on behalf of the Iraqi people, because the Iraqis live under Saddam Hussein ‘and they will be far, far better off when they are liberated from his brutal, incredibly oppressive rule’” (“Threats and Responses”). Many European countries refused to become involved due to antiwar sentiment and a lack of justification to the involvement. The government promised people that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction but later investigations revealed that this was false. This lie was useful for justifying American involvement in Iraq. This is another example of the government misleading the public to cover up their own moral failings. Widespread peace protests were reminiscent of the peace movement during the Vietnam War. But despite the numbers against violent action, Bush moved forward with the invasion.

During the war, it was essential that the capital of Iraq be captured. In the battle for Baghdad, civilian casualties were unavoidable. Air raids, targeted at Hussein’s forces, hit civilian infrastructure as well and inflicted thousands of casualties. Reports from a hospital 30 miles south of the city saw 280 wounded civilians in one day from the bombing (“U.S. Ground Forces”). Within Baghdad, the Red Cross became concerned about a humanitarian crisis. USA Today reports: “At the Al-Yarmouk Hospital in south Baghdad, for instance, ‘they were brought in a steady influx at a rate of about 100 patients an hour,’ said Roland Huguenin-Benjamin of the International Committee for the Red Cross in Baghdad.” “‘Can you help get my arms back? Do

you think the doctors can get me another pair of hands?’ asked Ali Ismaeel Abbas, 12, lying in a hospital after a missile killed most of his family and blew off his arms” (Zoroya and Walt). Iraqi people began to flee the city in the hopes of escaping the violence. It was encouraged that people remain inside because of how dangerous it was to be outside (Zoroya and Walt).

A distinct parallel between the Iraq War and Dresden has already been made by the German people. Andreas Huyssen writes of the German protests against the Iraq War and claims the roots of the protest to be in WWII. He describes a broadening of the present which successfully unites all generations of Germans. Young protesters marched under the slogan: “We know what it’s like to be bombed,” with signs that equated Dresden with Baghdad (Huyssen 165).

Huyssen credits revived interest in the bombings to the book *Der Brand* [*The Fire, The Burning*] by Jorg Friedrich (166). This book brought Dresden up front in the present in a similar manner as *Slaughterhouse-Five* captured American attention in the Vietnam War era. An increased focus on Dresden in the media encouraged Germans to make a connection to the Iraq War (Huyssen 167). Television screens would be filled with images of Dresden next to coverage of the bombing of Baghdad. This moment witnessed a closing of the gap between past and present. Huyssen says of the book: “As the borders between past and present become fluid, it is as if one shared the experience itself” (170). Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* also fits into this context and continues to serve as a reminder of past events. While *Der Brand* encouraged the German people to make connections with the past, so *Slaughterhouse-Five* continues to do so in America.

Slaughterhouse-Five also blurs the lines between past and present by making Dresden a current issue. Vonnegut’s book is still widely read whether it be in the classroom or for pleasure.

The parallels between Dresden and Iraq can be seen. When Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* he was correct in saying that wars would always continue to happen. A friend told him that he might as well write an anti-glacier book instead. Vonnegut says: “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” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 4). He was right; years after this book’s publication in 1969, violence and destruction continue to happen. The invasion of Baghdad is proof that in wartime, leaders will still resort to destructive bombing and the sacrifice of civilians in the name of victory. Anyone reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* could still identify with Vonnegut’s pacifist message.

V.

As a form of art, literature has the potential of making different experiences available and generating discussion on previously ignored issues. It has the power to string together various events throughout time and to encourage readers to do the same. Literature can work as an agent of change by creating social awareness and encouraging action. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a successful piece of literature because it created meaning out of a past event and brought it into public discussion. Vonnegut’s novel is in part responsible for bringing the destruction of Dresden to the public eye. By writing about the bombing, Vonnegut shares his experience with readers and creates empathy for those who suffered. As a protest novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also helped to enact social change by encouraging more young people to speak out against government action in the Vietnam War. What really makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* successful is the way Vonnegut’s novel still carries meaning within the context of more contemporary issues. The recent Iraq War was met with widespread protest and resulted in high civilian casualties. Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* today, one can find meaning in the Dresden bombing and see the

similarities between current wars and past events. The pacifist message of the novel carries through time and encourages protest against violent tragedies. Vonnegut's novel is one piece of evidence that art has the power to draw on past events and make them present and meaningful in a new way to a new generation of people.

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