

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO VONNEGUT

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I

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* by directly facing the “Dresden experience,” Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in a sense consummated a period in his writing career. When his first works appeared in the early 60’s, he was merely seen as a paperback SF writer. Hardly any literary critics took his works seriously simply because they were categorized as science fiction. It has often been the case that science fiction does not draw literary attention in the U.S.: “Thus it may be very much in an author’s interest to avoid the science fiction category if possible.”¹ However, Vonnegut did and still does pose this crucial question: what are the human beings to do in this highly technological and scientific thus hopelessly dehumanized society? Although this question is constantly raised and occupies an exceedingly important position in all of his stories, in this paper I will concentrate on *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I will attempt to explain what kind of solution to the above mentioned question he offers to the reader and how he does it. And I at the same time will try to show that *Slaughterhouse-Five* could well be called the “Gospel According to Vonnegut.”

II

A tradition of atheism and pacifism ran through the Vonnegut family. Kurt Vonnegut in his childhood received an education that emphasized the superiority and significance of mankind:

Vonnegut was taught to believe in the perfectibility of man, in the marvels of science and technology, and he was taught that he should assume a role in the creation of a ‘brave new world.’²

Vonnegut in addition shows at least on the surface level a strong aversion to any organized religions including, of course, Christianity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Kilgore Trout, a science fiction writer and character whom Vonnegut repeatedly

uses in his stories and who seems to be his alter ego, depicts Jesus' death in the "Gospel from Outer Space" in a negative and unfavorable manner: "The Son of God was dead as a doornail. So it goes."³ This brief passage alone well illustrates Vonnegut's overall attitude toward the so-called Christianity, especially in light of the fact that Kilgore Trout is his alter ego.

At the same time one can find Vonnegut being unchangingly an absolute humanist. This characteristic is demonstrated through his consistent warning and protest against the ever-increasing danger in an overwhelmingly technological society. He furthermore seems to be keenly sensitive to the possibility of another war, which could due to nuclear weapons wipe out the entire earth. In an interview Vonnegut says:

And it's been the university experience that taught me that there is a very good reason, that you catch people before they become generals and presidents and so forth and you poison their minds with... humanity, and however you want to poison their minds, it's presumably to encourage them to make a better world.⁴

On another occasion Vonnegut the humanist addresses a group of graduates. The following he presents with much humor and yet in total earnest:

... he told... Shakespeare was wrong to say, 'The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on': 'I have to tell you that a worm can be stepped on in such a way that it can't possibly turn after you remove your foot.'⁵

In Chapter I of *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut mentions Lot's wife from Genesis in the Old Testament. Vonnegut looks through the Gideon Bible in a motel room "for tales of great destruction."⁶ And one tale which he encounters is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from Chapter 19 of Genesis. Vonnegut expresses his feelings toward Lot's wife:

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.⁷

Thus the ultimate question that the humanist Vonnegut would like to raise is "what in hell are people for?" which appears in his earlier work, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Consequently, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be satisfactorily inter-

preted only when viewed as a work by a writer with the above mentioned two traits: his seeming atheism and unquestionable humanism. It can be furthermore said that these two features are dependent on each other, and they both share an extremely important place in the work.

III

Slaughterhouse-Five is based on the bombing of Dresden by the Allied Forces, which Vonnegut himself experienced as a prisoner of war. The following are some statistical facts about the bombing:

On the night of February 13/14, about 800 RAF Lancaster heavy bombers struck in two waves.... The next day, 450 American B-17 Fortresses dropped more bombs, and P-51 Mustang fighters strafed the wrecked city.... Casualties were variously estimated... 135,000... is the normally accepted figure.⁸

Vonnegut feels that there has not been proper understanding about this great tragedy unprecedented in human history and that even the American people have not been adequately informed of the entire picture of this holocaust. In Chapter one of *Slaughterhouse-Five* he states:

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.⁹

IV

As I mentioned at the outset of this paper, I would like now to turn to this work as the "Gospel According to Vonnegut." Prime attention must be paid to Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in the story. Billy, although a protagonist, is by no means a hero in the traditional sense. He is depicted as a hopelessly weak and fragile individual. He has no intention to and naturally is unable to change his destiny. He is totally passive and accepts things the way they are without even pondering the act of "accepting" that he does. At the same time, the same Billy is a person who never hurts or harms anybody. Even in the war he never even attempts to shoot a gun or kill the enemy. In the war, although Billy is a chaplain's assistant, and not a soldier, his utter inability and unwillingness to participate in the war stand out conspicuously. Especially in a war in which killing is done

nearly as normally and frequently as eating or sleeping in peacetime, Billy's attitude seems considerably holy and saintly. To Vonnegut Billy is the sort of character who is of extreme importance. Vonnegut obviously places his hope for some kind of human redemption, if not salvation, on a "Billy." This characteristic of Billy goes well with "the canary in the coal mine theory:"

The best thing I could come up with was what I call the canary in the coal mine theory of the arts. This theory says that artists are useful to society because they are so sensitive.... They keel over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize that there is any danger whatsoever.¹⁰

Thus Billy fittingly plays the canary role in this overpoweringly dangerous and insane world, instead of in a coal mine, transcending both time and space.

V

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the portrayal of Billy Pilgrim to a great extent overlaps with that of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. If Billy truly performs the role of a present-day Jesus in this work, it can evidently be called a modern version of the Gospels. As touched on earlier in the paper, Vonnegut characterizes and creates his Jesus image through the eyes of his alter ego, Kilgore Trout. The Jesus that Trout portrays appears in the "Gospel from Outer Space:"

It was *The Gospel from Outer Space* by Kilgore Trout. It was about a visitor from outer space, shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian, by the way. The visitor from outer space made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel.... He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low.

But the Gospels actually taught this:

Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure that he isn't well connected. So it goes.... The visitor from outer space made a gift to Earth of a new Gospel. In it, Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had.... So the people amused themselves one day by nailing him to a cross and planting the cross in the ground.... The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son.... God said this: *From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!*¹¹

As can be seen from this “Gospel,” the Jesus figure that Billy is meant to represent, at least on the surface level, is quite different from the Jesus depicted in the four Gospels. However, Billy is given the same attribute that Jesus Christ possessed, namely His dual character as the Son of God and Son of Man. Although recently this belief has been openly challenged and there has been a “new debate over Jesus’ divinity,”¹² a majority of theologians still hold the position “that Jesus Christ was both ‘true God and true Man.’”¹³ Billy, too, has this dual nature; he quite frequently emerges as a super-human being, while sometimes manifesting his genuinely human aspects.

VI

His super-human trait undoubtedly arises from his powers to time-travel. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he intermittently time-travels being freed from all the restrictions of time and space :

Billy says that he first came unstuck in time in 1944, long before his trip to Tralfamadore.¹⁴

He is in this manner able to look back at the past or foresee the future. He knows in the most minute detail what did, does, and will happen at any point in the course of his life. This ability emancipates him from the fear and anxiety of not being able to know what to expect in the future, which mankind universally possesses. Being always above this fear and anxiety, Billy lives his life exceedingly monotonously, if not peacefully. This very manner in which Billy leads his life becomes strikingly apparent when Roland Weary appears on the scene. Billy and Weary (in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut when describing Roland Weary uses “Weary” instead of the first name) are two quite contrastive figures. Billy, as a chaplain’s assistant, does not really take part in the war to fight against the enemy:

A chaplain’s assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends. In fact, he had no friends. He was a valet to a preacher, expected no promotions or medals, bore no arms, and had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid.¹⁵

After being captured by the Germans, Billy even becomes a subject of a German

war correspondent who wanted to show “heartening evidence of how miserably equipped the American Army often was, despite its reputation for being rich.”¹⁶ On the contrary, Weary is an eighteen year-old soldier who is extremely willing to fight. He is cruel and merciless, and is inclined to do anything in order to have his own way :

He asked Billy what he thought the worst form of execution was. Billy had no opinion. The correct answer turned out to be this: ‘You stake a guy on an anthill in the desert—see? He’s facing upward, and you put honey all over his balls and pecker, and you cut off his eyelids so he has to stare at the sun till he dies.’ So it goes.¹⁷

To Weary, Billy is just an embarrassing example of an American soldier. Weary cannot even bear to think that such a miserable and cowardly man as Billy also is part of the mighty American Army. However, it is Billy, not Weary, who survives the dreadful and frightful war. Tough and always brave Weary dies rather unexpectedly after he is ridden of his military boots by a German soldier. In exchange for the boots he is given a boy’s clogs which are too small for him. With these clogs on he has to walk for miles and miles in severely cold weather, which eventually brings about his death. But Billy, who has a markedly different style of living from that of Weary, lives through the adverse conditions that equally torture Billy and Weary. Billy’s total submissiveness and nonresistance to his fate derive from the Tralfamadorian understanding of time. Tralfamadore is a planet which is “446,120,000,000,000,000 miles away”¹⁸ from earth. The Tralfamadorian who kidnaps Billy tells him :

I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*.¹⁹

Billy’s first coming unstuck in time is long before his abduction to Tralfamadore, and the Tralfamadorians have nothing to do with his becoming able to time-travel:

They were simply able to give him insights into what was really going on.²⁰

Although it is not clear how Billy becomes endowed with his eccentric ability, he is perfectly able to look at and perceive time as one might see a stretch of the

Rocky Mountains. Thus, being able to apprehend what awaits him in the future, he can foresee that he does not die in the war. This apparently causes him to lead his life in an overly monotonous and plodding manner. In other words, his peculiar sense of time helps to put him above time and the war itself, which dramatically spotlights his super-human aspects.

Billy's death also much resembles that of Jesus. Billy is shot to death when addressing a large crowd on the subject of flying saucers by Lazzaro who promised in World War II to take revenge for the dying Weary. Billy with his Tralfamadorian way of understanding time says just before his death:

It is time for you to go home to your wives and children, and it is time for me to be dead for a little while—and then live again.²¹

The description of Billy's death is surprisingly similar to that of Jesus in the Bible:

saying, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him up to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill *Him*, and three days later He will rise again.'²²

... Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee.²³

Only with this super-human quality is Billy able to pull through the Dresden experience.

VII

In addition to this side of his character, just as Jesus was a man and the Son of God simultaneously, Billy also strongly exhibits his human character. It is in a sense very ironical that although he can come through the bombing of Dresden without too much bother thanks to his super-human conception of time, "he did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly."²⁴ Instead of resorting to his super-humanity, he "remembers," which is a very human property. Even a greater human characteristic that Billy has is his weeping, which also is one of the few redeeming features of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy, although not too many times, weeps. In the New Testament Jesus weeps only twice: one time when facing Jerusalem perceiving his fast approaching death on the cross (Luke

19 : 41—44), and the other time at the death of Lazarus (John 11 : 17—44). Jesus' weeping is generally understood as his possessing a very human nature :

John repeatedly emphasizes the human features of Jesus : Jesus hungers and thirsts . . . , he is weary, he weeps and becomes angry²⁵

Billy's weeping in the same way is demonstrative of his outright human disposition :

When Billy saw the condition of his means of transportation, he burst into tears. He hadn't cried about anything else in the war.²⁶

And after the war every now and then he weeps :

Every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping.²⁷

Later on, as a middle-aged optometrist, he would weep quietly and privately sometimes, but never make loud boohooing noises.

Which is why the epigraph of this book is the quatrain from the famous Christmas carol. Billy cried very little, though he often saw things worth crying about, and in *that* respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the carol :

The cattle are lowing,
The Baby awakes.
But the little Lord Jesus
No crying he makes.²⁸

Although "weeping" alone is a very human behavior and practice, "weeping for no apparent reason" may also not be considered peculiar or strange. A Scottish theologian, A. B. Davidson speaks of his experience :

Do you ever . . . without any special reason for grief, fall into uncontrollable weeping? . . . The other day that came upon me in great strength. I was alone ; and there came such a sense of the mystery, the uncertainty, the loneliness, the pathos of life, that I was for a long time shaken with sobs which I was unable to control.²⁹

Thusly it has been shown that Billy with his dual character can be said to play the Jesus role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the Gospel According to Vonnegut.

Conclusion

This work as a whole is deeply depressing and gloomy. It seems that one can hardly discern or recognize any redeeming features. It appears what one can do to

survive this cruel universe is to simply accept his fate without resistance. Passive acceptance of one's fate seems to be the only solution to facing harsh reality. However, there is still a hope, though terribly faint, in the story. The hope can only be and should be placed upon Billy Pilgrim, the apparent Jesus-figure in the "Gospel." It is certainly ironic and wry that the Weary-type person does not safely pass through a most adverse and antagonistic experience. Rather it is the Billy-type, "the canary in the coal mine," that can, although not precisely spiritually and aggressively, pull through hostile and tragic moments. Furthermore, Billy's weeping as was mentioned earlier is another dim sign of hope. Not only does this give him a very human characteristic, it also exposes the fact that he at least retains in a way a very movable and touching character. Vonnegut, making full use of his Gospel, bluntly questions the modern reader as to the direction into which our contemporary society is advancing.

Notes

- 1 Eric Rabkin, Robert Scholes, *Science Fiction: history, science, vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977), p. 97.
- 2 John Somer, *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz, John Somer (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 222.
- 3 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 203.
- 4 Robert Scholes, *The Vonnegut Statement*, p. 107.
- 5 Josephine Hendin, "The Writer as Culture Hero, The Father as Son," *Harpers Magazine*, July 1974, p. 82.
- 6 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 21.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 21—22.
- 8 Peter J. Reed, *Writers for the 70's: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1972), pp. 177—78.
- 9 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 10.
- 10 *The Vonnegut Statement*, p. 10.
- 11 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, pp. 108—10.
- 12 "New Debate over Jesus' Divinity," *Time*, Vol. III, No. 9 (February 27, 1978), 32.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 30—31.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 36—37.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 85—86.

- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 142—43.
- 22 The Gospel According to Mark (New American Standard Bible) 10 : 33—34.
- 23 The Gospel According to John 17 : 1.
- 24 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 177.
- 25 Werner G. Kummel, *The Theology of The New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 271.
- 26 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 197.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 29 Andrew B. Davidson, *The Called of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 44.,
quoted in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press,
1952), VIII, 646.

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