

# Is Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five an Anti-War Book?



## Pop Quiz

Which famous veteran author said the following?

"An anti-war book? Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?"

If you said Kurt Vonnegut, you're one hundred percent, absolutely, overwhelmingly, incredibly, astonishingly wrong.

Yes, this quote does appear in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Yes, Kurt Vonnegut the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, typed these words with his own two hands. But no, he does not say them. They are spoken by Harrison Star, "the famous Hollywood director." The narrator (if the narrator is in fact Vonnegut) responds to the quote. The actual exchange:

"You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?"

"No. What do you say, Harrison Star?"

"An anti-war book? Why not write an anti-*glacier* book

instead?"

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.

And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death."

This might sound like a quibble. The narrator ultimately agrees with Harrison Starr, doesn't he? It's not. To mistake the famous Hollywood director Harrison Star's words for Vonnegut's is to not only not get the joke, but to turn the living protest that is *Slaughterhouse-Five* into an artifact of a futility and resignation; it is to misunderstand what inspired Vonnegut's masterpiece and the unique role art can play in the wars we still fight.

## A Dostoevskian Digression

"Everything there is to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But that isn't enough anymore."

This is Captain Eliot Rosewater. During Billy Pilgrim's first mental breakdown, after he returns from World War Two and the Dresden firebombing, Eliot Rosewater teaches Billy about books, mostly Kilgore Trout, the excitable science fiction writer, but also about Fyodor Dostoevsky, the excitable religious writer.

I find this important. For all the obvious differences—aliens and spaceships mostly—Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* have a lot in common. They both wrestle with the possibility of free will in a deterministic universe. They both agonize over the impossibility of individual human action in an aggregate din of communal stupidity and vice. But more than this, they both tend to be remembered for the ideology the author despised.

Even those unfamiliar with *The Brothers Karamazov* will likely have read or heard of the “The Grand Inquisitor” section. It is often excerpted in literary anthologies. I have seen it published by itself and on the shelf at bookstores. In it, the atheist Ivan Karamazov tells his brother, the young priest Alyosha Karamazov, the story of a medieval Inquisitor. In the story, Christ returns to life. The Inquisitor arrests Christ. He tries to explain to Christ why He is no longer needed. People prefer earthly bread to the spiritual variety. The government will provide what Christ could not. Christ doesn’t respond with words. He simply kisses the Inquisitor.

This novelette within the larger novel is an eloquent, indeed almost perfect, argument against religion and proof of man’s spiritual poverty. It is so good that many critics believe that Dostoevsky secretly agreed with Ivan Karamazov’s unapologetic (and the Inquisitor’s *de facto*) atheism. Yet this is to confuse Dostoevsky the polemicist for Dostoevsky the artist. Dostoevsky embedded the Inquisitor’s argument within a larger frame, a single movement within a larger symphony. Only a fool would mistake a picture of the crucified Christ in the back of cathedral for the entire cathedral itself. To take Ivan’s story for the whole requires a seductive myopia on par with the Inquisitor’s (an argument could be made that this scene parallels a larger movement in miniature, but that’s different...).

## **On Tralfamadore We Are Forgiven**

Those who have read *Slaughterhouse-Five* know the refrain “So it goes” well. Vonnegut describes the destruction of Dresden and a flat bottle of champagne with the same verbal shrug. It is, Billy says, a Tralfamadorian sentiment. To the alien race Vonnegut describes, death is not a big deal because at some other moment that which is dead is alive. Existence is “structured that way.” No one has to feel bad about killing people or people they saw killed. If we all saw the big

picture, we would be content with the horrors we survive and the dead loved ones we forget.

Billy Pilgrim becomes a prophet for this new Tralfamadorian faith. It provides solace after the horrors he witnessed at Dresden. The irony is, of course, that this faith is no different than the old faith, the very pedestrian one that justifies past horrors by seeing them within a larger scheme of such horrors, that mistakes everything that happened as inevitable simply because it happened. But paralleled with one another, the two specious justifications and tempting causal chicaneries speak to the sparking mechanism, the relative and shifting dialectic common to any successful novel.

Think of it like a chorus of a Greek tragedy. These choruses often say something along these lines: "We are doomed"; "nothing means anything"; "is there any escape from the human woe?" The actors (and the plot) respond by proving the chorus only partly right, by committing the crimes and enacting the despair of the chorus. But in this conversation, in these repetitions and pointed articulations, a space opens up for the audience, for catharsis, for pity, for a world that is other than what is (Mikhail Bakhtin called this the dialogic imagination in Dostoevsky, but all worthwhile art employs to some degree this sustained thesis and antithesis, this ironic countervailing).

Here is Billy towards the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, again in a hospital. Bertram Copeland Rumfoord is in the bed beside him. A Harvard history professor, Rumfoord is a strong and outdoorsy man in the vein of Teddy Roosevelt—the narrator says Rumfoord actually looks like Teddy Roosevelt—writing a book about the U.S. Air Force. Rumfoord wishes Billy would just die so Rumfoord could forget his existence and finish the book. But, in what becomes the climax of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy speaks up. He says he was physically there at Dresden. Billy saw the destruction.

"It had to be done," Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.

"I know," said Billy.

"That's war."

"I know. I'm not complaining."

"It must have been hell on the ground."

"It was," said Billy Pilgrim.

"Pity the men who had to do it."

"I do."

"You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground."

"It was all right," said Billy. "Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore."

At the plot's critical moment, the moment when Billy finally speaks, when he employs his moral authority as a survivor of a massacre, the fact that he is an individual who existed in time, at a time—who therefore means something rather than nothing—Billy undermines his revelation with his talk of Tralfamadore. He justifies the Rumfoords of this world, those who say the last massacre excuses and ennobles the next. Everything has to be done because it has to be done, the ineluctable and geometric logic of the Inquisitor and cynical fanatics everywhere wins. The dialectic swings. Humanity, morality, and free will take it in the chin once again. Right?

No. Taken by itself, this exchange would indeed be an expression of profound despair. *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes a book making fun of anti-glacier books. But it is not a book making fun of anti-glacier books. It is an anti-glacier book. It is an anti-glacier book because each of these

pronouncements—these biting excretions of apathy and mordancy—exist in conversation with other modulated choric futilities, and within these parallel and expertly crafted rhythms, space opens up for a world without glaciers, without any large impossible blocks of necessary and ineluctable ice (to be clear, I'm talking about war here).

From *Slaughterhouse-Five's* first chapter:

“Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn't a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been in Hiroshima, for instance. I didn't know that either. There hadn't been much publicity.

I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid as I had seen it, about the book I would write. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out dead jews and so on.

“All I could say was, “I know, I know. *I know.*””

Three “knows.” Note the italics on the third know. For the University of Chicago professor (as for his fictional doppelgänger, the Harvard educated Rumfoord), what we “know” has become an excuse not to act. Knowledge of one genocide clouds our vision of another. We despair of our condition and reconcile ourselves to it by parroting each historical genocide like some Gregorian chant in the church of moral abnegation.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, taken as a whole, is nothing if not a hilarious satire of this criminal sentiment by supposedly sentient creatures—a rebuke to those who use knowledge of the past to excuse future repetitions, who lack the fortitude to imagine why we know what we claim to know, who in their desperation for forgiveness end up excusing the crime through

a grotesque and pompous teleological satisfaction.

Like Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, Vonnegut's success extends directly from how deeply Vonnegut subjects himself to what he doesn't personally hold to be true (the inevitability of the Dresden firebombing and the Vietnam War), how artfully and doggedly he mines the implicit ideology of historical stupefaction, our lazy biological predestination, the complacent and smug morality that looks on war and murder and slaughter and says it was meant to be because it hurts too much to admit it (and we) equally could not have been.

## **Flying Backwards and Other Historical Angels**

Many admire the scene in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Billy watches the World War Two film backwards and bombers fly in reverse over Germany to suck shrapnel from the earth and the good people of America work hard to dismantle bombers and bury ammunition. I do too. It speaks to possibility. It speaks to a response to Tralfamadorians of other worlds and Rumfoords of this world. It speaks to a world where we are not implicitly forgiven our wars by the lie of power and fact of survival, where our blinkered unimaginative humanity does not excuse our repetitive and moronic inhumanity.

But I also especially admire another scene. It's in the book's first chapter. Vonnegut tells us about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He describes Lot's wife before God turns her into a pillar of salt:

"And Lot's wife, of course, was told not 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."

Vonnegut is a pillar of salt. He doesn't simply look back. He does not "record experience." He writes an anti-war book that

admits it might as well be an anti-glacier book, which makes the best possible argument for the permanence and monolithic nature of war, but adamantly remains an anti-war book. In short, Vonnegut's expertly crafted and strategically balanced novel testifies to the radical instability of existence, including the supposed inevitability of whatever war we happen to be fighting. It is an explicit rejection of the iron laws of academic causality, of history as we claim to know it. It responds to those who pretend to believe in free will and learning but who in truth seek in history the precedent and justification for future ignorance and violence.

So this July 4<sup>th</sup> over natty boh, fireworks, and talk of long ago wars please take a moment to think of Kurt Vonnegut—it might have been hopeless to attack a giant clump of floating ice with nothing more than a few jokes and stories about aliens, but we should love him for it, because it is so human, and we need all the humanity we can get in a world where [endable wars never end](#) and the massacres [continue apace](#).