

## Sight (Un)Seen: Kurt Vonnegut's Literary Optometry

As James Lundquist has noted, *Slaughterhouse-Five* places a “considerable emphasis on seeing things” (50). Indeed, a philosophizing optometrist and a plethora of sight imagery are indications that the novel is concerned with optometry. Like *Oedipus the King* or *King Lear*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* uses a sight motif to develop a relationship between a character's eyesight and insight. Since a character's vision corresponds to his perspective, it is significant that several characters in the novel exhibit a problem with their vision as they look at war. Through these characters Vonnegut critiques the “refractive errors” in humanity.

Through Roland Weary, Vonnegut critiques the human inclination to romanticize war. Vonnegut admits in his *Paris Review* interview that he initially conceived *Slaughterhouse-Five* to be a romanticized account of his war experiences. According to one of O'Hare's books, Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, a romantic representation of war “dilates upon” the “piety and heroism” of warriors “and portrays, in the most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves” (15-16).

But Mary O'Hare warns Vonnegut that books or movies that make war “look just wonderful” produce more wars (14). She convinces Vonnegut that a novelist must take seriously his role of representing reality. So instead of dilating upon Roland Weary's virtues, modeling him after John Wayne or Frank Sinatra, Vonnegut depicts the soldier as myopic: “His vision of the outside world was limited to what he could see through a narrow slit between the rim of his helmet and his scarf from

home” (41). He is so nearsighted that he perceives himself to be a war hero, “safe at home, having survived the war, and . . . telling his parents and his sister a true war story” (42) of how “The Three Musketeers” fought valiantly behind enemy lines.

Vonnegut juxtaposes Weary’s distorted perspective with “the true war story [that] was still going on” (42). “In real life” Weary is anything but magnanimous (42). The pornographic picture he carries, for example, symbolizes his perverseness. He is obsessed with torture; he even owns an Iron Maiden, which gouges a victim’s eyes. When the two scouts abandon Weary and Billy, shattering Weary’s imaginary war story, Weary pulverizes Billy with murderous intent. Clearly, Vonnegut believes that romanticizing war as a story of heroes and adventures would be a gross distortion of reality. Other war novels might trace a hero’s escapades, but early into *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut kills off Weary, his only potential romantic hero, and centers the story on Billy Pilgrim, the epitome of an anti-hero.

Through Billy, Vonnegut critiques the human inclination to ignore war. As an optometrist, Billy uses instruments “for measuring refractive errors in eyes—in order that corrective lenses may be prescribed” (56). After having returned home from World War Two, he “found life meaningless, partly because of what [he] had seen in war” (101). He learns how to cope by listening to the Tralfamadorians, who “give him insights about what was really going on” (30). After digesting the Tralfamadorian perspective on life, Billy proclaims their philosophy. He sees his role as “prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” who “were lost and wretched . . . because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore” (29).

The Tralfamadorians avoid painful experiences by simply ignoring them. When Montana Wildhack screams, for example, they close their eyes tight “because Montana’s terror was so unpleasant to see” (133). Painful moments such as war are unavoidable, they tell Billy, “so we simply don’t look at them” (117). Instead, they choose to look at “pleasant moments” (117). They tell Billy that Earthlings should learn to “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (117).

But, as Billy realizes, humans do not have the universal hindsight and foresight of the Tralfamadorians. Billy, like all humans, ends up focusing primarily on the present. “Whatever Billy saw through the pipe,” that symbolizes his inability to escape a present-tense perspective, “he had no choice but to say to himself, ‘That’s life’” (115). But by becoming “unstuck in time,” Billy can ignore, even escape, the pain of the present. When Roland Weary is hunting for him, for example, Billy has his first time-traveling experience, “leaning against a tree with his eyes closed” like the Tralfamadorians (43). Billy’s ability to close his eyes is what Lundquist identifies as “the pragmatic value to his vision” that “enables him to deal with the horror of Dresden and to get around the question of ‘Why me?’ that echoes throughout the novel” (52).

Indeed, the result of the Tralfamadorian perspective is that human experiences cannot possess meaning. “‘There is no *why*,’” the Tralfamadorians tell Billy (Vonnegut 77). They insist that humans are misguided in their attempt to make sense of reality, which “‘does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*’” (85-86). This perspective informs their indifference to the destruction of the universe by another Tralfamadorian: “‘He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*.

We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way” (117). Despite being able to see everything, the Tralfamadorians refuse to see significance in humanity. They are amused “that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” that are easily expendable (154).

Echoing the Tralfamadorians, Billy foregoes explaining his experiences at Dresden: “‘It was all right,’ said Billy. ‘*Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore” (198). This resignation, or pacifism, is antithetical to Vonnegut’s anti-war sentiments. Unlike Vonnegut, who criticized the Vietnam War, Billy “was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do” (60). As Billy and the Tralfamadorians demonstrate, the inclination to turn a blind eye to war cultivates moral apathy.

Vonnegut, of course, critiques Billy’s perspective of reality. Billy’s unwillingness to explain his experiences in war runs contrary to human nature. Explanation, the Tralfamadorians tell Billy, is a uniquely human desire or need: “‘Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided’” (85). Vonnegut hopes that by explaining the Dresden bombing in his war novel, he can somehow prevent future wars. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, says Ann Rigney, is concerned “with the ongoing moral injunction emanating from the sufferings of others in the past to refrain from stepping blindly into present and future wars” (21). However, through his persona, Vonnegut critiques the human attempt to comprehend and prevent war.

Chapter One focuses on Vonnegut's experience as a journalist, which he believes will prove useful for writing an account of the bombing of Dresden. "Working as a police reporter for the famous Chicago City News Bureau" (8), Vonnegut investigated a death-by-elevator and reported on "what the squashed guy had looked like" (9). He says the gore did not faze him, for he had "seen lots worse than that in the war" (10). Relying on his training as a journalist, Vonnegut writes the Air Force, "asking for details about the raid on Dresden, who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on" (11). Vonnegut's methodology resembles the process of writing a historical account, which, according to Charles Mackay, will explain who the actors were, why they acted the way they did, and how they acted that way. Like the exhibits he sees at the World's Fair, his novel could attempt to show "what the past had been like" and then predict "what the future will be like" (18). If he can explain the factors leading up to the Dresden bombing, he might be able to prevent future massacres.

When the Air Force informs him that any information about the Dresden bombing "was top secret still" (11), Vonnegut assumes "it would be easy for [him] to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all [he] would have to do would be to report what [he] had seen" (2). If anyone could explain why Dresden was bombed, it would be Vonnegut—he was there and saw what happened. Much of Chapter One, therefore, also emphasizes Vonnegut's credibility as an eyewitness. Dresden, he says, "looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio" (1). On the way to visit O'Hare, he describes a waterfall as well as the girls' outfits. He skims through Mary Endell's *Dresden*,

*History, Stage and Gallery* to get “a bird’s-eye view of how Dresden came to look as it does, architecturally” (17).

But a report of “the raid as [he] had seen it” is missing from his book (10). Instead of representing Dresden realistically, Vonnegut relies on increasingly fanciful similes to describe what he observed. Dresden, he says, looked “like the surface of the moon” (59); “it looked like a Sunday School picture of Heaven” (148); it looked like “Oz” (148). Most importantly, Vonnegut fails to understand or explain the Dresden massacre. His only explanation for his survival and even his vocational success after the war is luck, summarized by the phrase “if the accident will” (2). Just as he and O’Hare had given up “on remembering” the war (15), Vonnegut gives up on trying to explain the Dresden bombing in his war book. Just as Lot’s wife was destroyed for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah, Vonnegut’s cognition is destroyed when he looks back at Dresden. “People aren’t supposed to look back,” he laments. “I’m certainly not going to do it anymore” (22).

It is clear that *Slaughterhouse-Five* critiques the “refractive errors” in humanity’s view of war. Humans will continue to distort or ignore wars unless their vision is corrected. As Weary, Billy, and the novelist’s persona illustrate, the consequences of defective vision are severe. Vonnegut, however, does not leave us without an answer; he may be cynical, but he is not a nihilist. He hints at his solution by describing Kilgore Trout, his alter ego, as someone who was able to see “without glasses” (170). Ultimately, Vonnegut prescribes art—specifically, novels—as the corrective lens through which humanity should view reality.

Because it is fiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can represent war as Vonnegut thinks humanity should see it. This novel's "particular attention to the sensual and experiential aspects of war," Ann Rigney argues, "clearly has a role to play in building an imaginative and empathic bridge between past actors and present readers" (17). Inspired by the telegraphic schizophrenic form of Tralfamadorian fiction, Vonnegut has carefully chosen individual scenes from war to construct into a literary mosaic, "so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (88). As Robert Tally, Jr., argues, Vonnegut's enterprise in *Slaughterhouse-Five* evokes a modernist aesthetic: "the book that might appear to be Vonnegut's most *postmodern* novel . . . actually comes closest to fulfilling the modernist project of representing and reintegrating the fragmentary, perhaps chaotic, pieces of a culture . . . into a meaningful image" (xviii).

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret *Slaughterhouse-Five* as Vonnegut's affirmation of Tralfamadorian idealism. He says he is "not overjoyed" with the Tralfamadorians' perspective of reality (Vonnegut 211). Even the novel's final scene, where Billy is enjoying "his happiest moment"—a "sun-drenched snooze in the back of the wagon" (195)—does not exemplify the Tralfamadorian injunction to "concentrate on the happy moments of . . . life" and "ignore the unhappy ones" (195). For in the paragraphs preceding Billy's "happiest moment," Vonnegut describes the rancid smell of the thousands of rotting corpses in Dresden, the mass cremations of these bodies, the death of the Maori who worked with Billy, and the execution of Edgar Derby. So it goes.

Vonnegut is a realist, and he does not mince words about the reality of death. He realizes that humans will be fighting one another, “and even if wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death” (4). Vonnegut does not use his fiction to misrepresent the postmodern world as innately comprehensible or wholly pleasant. Instead, he uses his fiction to save us from despair by showing us where to look for the “many marvelous moments” that exist in the human experience (88), because, as he points out, “so many of those moments are nice” (211). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he emphasizes the significance of life, the beauty of friendships, the ability to laugh in the face of evil, and the hope and transcendence found in stories, such as Cinderella, that Wilson Taylor calls the “narratives of redemption.” Vonnegut believes fiction can help humanity see good moments in all of life, even a massacre.



## Works Cited

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