

Notes on *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The repetition of the expression “So it goes” after every mention of a person’s death suggests two of the novel’s central ideas:

1. Death is inevitable and universal, a basic fact of existence for living things.
2. Given this fact, the appropriate attitude toward death is casual acceptance. “So it goes” is much like “C’est la vie,” a commonly used French expression that literally translates to “that’s life” or “such is life,” suggesting that life is full of disappointments that can’t be avoided—except in this case the “disappointment” is the end of one’s existence, so the expression is humorously understated in tone.

From the Tralfamadorian point of view, a person’s life and death exist simultaneously since time is an illusion, so it is foolish to think of death as an “end” or as something to get upset about. In fact, their philosophy implies that one should never get upset over anything, since it is all unavoidable anyway. In a sense, everything that will ever happen has already happened, so how could it be changed?

It is this fact that makes Billy’s “time travel” (being “unstuck in time”) possible: he is able to experience events “out of order” because the order itself is just an illusion, and his mind has moved beyond that illusion. But even though this perspective gives him knowledge of future events, he can’t change them, because they have already happened. (This realization fits with Billy’s extremely passive personality: he understands that he cannot change anything, so in a sense he just relaxes and lets it unfold—this is a characteristically Tralfamadorian attitude.)

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance.[...]It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

The philosophical concept that all events (including human choices) are “set in stone” and cannot be changed because they proceed according to absolute laws of cause and effect is known as *determinism*. It is similar to *fatalism*, the belief that fate or destiny determines the course of events.

Wars, and terrible crimes like the bombing of Dresden, are just as inevitable as the deaths of individuals. So the novel is a paradox: it is meant, in part, as a warning and a reminder to help people avoid war, but it acknowledges that war cannot be avoided. Trying to prevent wars from occurring is as pointless as trying to keep a glacier from moving:

“You know what I say to people when I hear they’re writing anti-war books?”

“No. What *do* you say, Harrison Starr?”

“I say, ‘Why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?’”

The novel suggests that Billy’s ideas about time travel and Tralfamadorians may merely be the result of the head injury he sustains in the airplane crash, but the clues are ambiguous: some details of the novel suggest these ideas are just delusions, while others suggest they are factual.

Another central idea in the novel is **absurdity** (which in this sense can also be expressed as **irony**): the observation that human life and human society are full of absurd situations and decisions, and sometimes these absurdities are horrifying and tragic. The incident that serves as the foundation for this theme is mentioned early on: in the

aftermath of the deaths of many thousands of people in the bombing of Dresden, Edgar Derby is summarily executed for the simple act of taking a teapot from the ruins of a building.

“I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby,” I said. “The irony is *so* great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he’s given a regular trial, and then he’s shot by a firing squad.”

Themes and Motifs

The tragic absurdity of human life and behavior: Many of the things we do, and many of the things that happen to us, are illogical, arbitrary, tragic, and ironic.

- The execution of Edgar Derby for stealing a teapot (following the murder of hundreds of thousands of people) seems unjust and ironic.
- The Tralfamadorian interest in observing human behavior suggests that our behavior is a fascinating subject of study for those who are not influenced by our biases and preconceptions about behavioral standards.

Fatalism and determinism: All events exist simultaneously; time is just a subjective perception of events. One implication of this view of reality is that we are all governed by fate, since in a sense everything that is going to happen has already happened.

- The futility of our efforts to affect the future is one aspect of the absurdity and helplessness of our lives.
- The Tralfamadorian saying “So it goes” is an expression of the acceptance of absurd, arbitrary fate (the equivalent of “shit happens.”)

The vast cruelty and suffering of war:

- Because the suffering that results from a decision such as the bombing of Dresden is so removed from those who cause it, it is abstract; thus it is much easier to callously inflict such suffering.
- Those who have experienced war firsthand tend to be cynical about it (there are no real “good guys” if even the U.S. can commit acts like the bombing of Dresden) and opposed to it.