

The Analysis of “ So it goes ” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Abstract: This paper mainly focuses on the meanings of “so it goes” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which in order to dig out the different feelings and attitude of Billy behind the “so it goes”, such as his desperation, numbness, sadness, reconciliation, etc., and then comes to the conclusion that the change of emotional attitude of Billy is gradual and procedural. In this paper, it is mainly analyzed “so it goes” in three stages of despair, numbness, and reconciliation. Through my research, readers can learn that the repeated appearance of this sentence is actually of great significance to the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. And help readers better understand the theme of war, the theme of life and death which reflected in this novel, and inspire readers to love life, love peace and away from war.

Keywords: So it goes; *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Desperation; Numbness; Reconciliation

1. Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut was an American author best known for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut centers much of his work around three general concepts: Pacifism, social equality and the need for common decency. He targets dehumanization through technology, sexuality and violence as his main villains.

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) is a science fiction-infused anti-war novel by Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007). “It follows the life and experiences of Billy Pilgrim, from his early years to his time as an American soldier and chaplain’s assistant during World War II, to the postwar years, with Billy occasionally traveling through time itself.”^[1] The text centers on Billy’s capture by the German Army and his survival of the Allied firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war, an experience which Vonnegut himself lived through as an American serviceman.

At present, most domestic researches focus on the black humor in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or the war trauma. Very few people pay attention to the different subtle emotional differences reflected in “so it goes”. This paper aims to explore the different emotional meanings contained in it through the detailed analysis, so as to help later readers better understand the value and significance of this sentence, then have a deeper understanding on whole novel.

2. The Analysis of “ So it goes ” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

2.1 “ So it goes ” and no hope

“ So it goes ” reflects there is no hope in war, and the desperation of Billy to this abnormal world. The hope that keeps us progressing from the worst of times into the better. It’s the hope within decease that new life will come and people will derive to be better that makes it the greatest of all human approvals. Hence, in such a novel where it is difficult to see such hope in persons such as Billy Pilgrim and the horror of the Dresden Bombings. “ When Billy Pilgrim’s name was inscribed in the ledger of the prison camp, he was given a number, too, and an iron dogtag in which that number was stamped. A slave laborer from Poland had done the stamping. He was dead , so it goes ” When Billy Pilgrim get into prison, he was given an iron dogtag. In all horror and decease around him. “so it goes “ come again, We could see that Billy just like a stock strained in cage which could be killed casually. Billy can not decided his own destiny and life, the dogtag exists as no hope.

The same is done by Vonnegut with Rosewater.” Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy were dealing with similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen year old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes ”. Rosewater is a wise man, but a wise man would become stupid and made irreparable mistakes in the war. The wrong shooting of the 14-year-old child has brought profound war trauma to Rosewater.” So it goes ” here cast a layer of tragic color on the war, which profoundly reflects the ignorance of war, the cruelty and dehumanization of war.

2.2 “ So it goes ” and numbness

“ So it goes ” projects the meaningless death in war and the attitude of Billy toward it gradually from desperation to numbness. When Billy has learned to see time in an entirely new Tralfamadorian way, that he change his own perception to individual death,

“There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no cause, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.” because everyone lives forever in the eyes of a Tralfamadorian. Since Tralfamadorian time is everpresent and ominous, a person’s death is only one portion of the entire, collective lifespan. Tralfamadorianism is fundamentally an elaborate escape method that Billy Pilgrim creates to make his life simpler and to lessen the impact death once had on his life, so he gradually becomes numb.

“To emphasize the absolute meaninglessness of death, Kurt Vonnegut uses the phrase “so it goes” over eighty times within *Slaughterhouse-five* after every instance of death that is mentioned. This phrase is not only a way for Billy Pilgrim to distract himself from his own death but it also allows Billy Pilgrim to denote the deaths of others as well”^[2]. “So it goes” is a reminder that no matter how important we think our death or the death of a loved one is, there have been countless billions of deaths before us”^[3]. This unsympathetic statement coincides with the theory of Tralfamadorianism because in a pre-destined world, nothing can be done to escape or alter death. Tralfamadorians do not give death any special thought because they view death as outside their realm of control. “In allowing instances of death to trail off into oblivion with “so it goes”, Vonnegut conveys to the readers that death, the ultimate sacrifice in war, can be a rather indifferent matter”^[4]. With less emphasis on the final outcome of life, Billy Pilgrim is able to view death as an insignificant result of a pre-destined life. This attitude can be applied to war situations as well, and allows Billy to remember World War II as a detached bystander rather than a pained participant.

When Kurt Vonnegut brings the reader to the climax of the novel, the bombing of Dresden, Billy’s sense of helplessness is finally understood. Just as individual deaths do not have specific meaning, it was not the individual deaths of war that have an impact on Billy Pilgrim, it is the collective death toll of war that causes him to resort to Tralfamadorianism. All of these urge Billy change his attitude “so it goes” from the desperation to numbness. This kind of numbness is not indifference to death, but conversely perceiving the death and sufferings with a new way of thinking.

2.3 “So it goes” and reconciliation

“So it goes” reflects the final reconciliation between Billy and the trauma that war brings to him, from the desperation to numbness and eventually reach the reconciliation. Billy begins his stay with the Tralfamadorians, and learns about their concept of time and their philosophy of acceptance. If there is no free will, and if each moment is structured so that it can only occur the way it occurs, then it makes sense to accept things as they come. Reconciliation to the world, or the “So it goes” attitude, comes from visiting all the moments of one’s life innumerable times. The moment of death is no more permanent than any other moment.

This realization comes as a great comfort to Billy, given the horrible killing he has witnessed. Since it offers him immediate comfort. In the veterans’ hospital, Rosewater and Billy brood fatalistically about the state of their universe, and Kilgore Trout’s science fiction provides a welcome escape. The lighthearted Tralfamadorian touches in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, such as the aliens’ resemblance to toilet plungers or the ridiculous showroom in which they house Billy, temper the devastation of the war scenes. “Science fiction helps him and Rosewater as they attempt to “reinvent themselves and reinvent their universe.”^[5] Perhaps Billy, unable to change the fact that he cannot live his life normally after the war, but salvages his sanity by inventing a new understanding of the nature of time. Billy is at peace through this way. Billy probably suffers from both disillusionment from the war and delusions. While the delusions may outweigh his disillusionment in terms of his mental well-being, they perhaps allow him to function, at least part of the time, in the normal working world and maintain a state of reconciliation with himself. All in all, “so it goes” means Billy actually has to accept the situation, and find a way to reconcile himself with the pain and decease in war.

Conclusion

“So it goes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, meanings such as “everything goes away”, “because of it”, “that’s all” and so on. Obviously, the latter two are mostly used in the novel”^[6]. But no matter how to interpret it, “so it goes” reflects different feelings of Billy to death and war, which is mainly from the desperation to numbness and eventually reach the reconciliation. The repeated appearance of this sentence is of great significance to the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

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