

An Examination of How Absurdity Influences Reality in the Works on Vonnegut and Carver

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The study of English requires not only the ability to recognize and understand the significant details of a written work, but also to draw critical comparisons to the world that surrounds the text, whether they come from the opinions of academic scholars, other works by the author, texts written by different authors, or most importantly the ideas of the reader. For the study of English to succeed, readers must take an active role by dissecting the written word and determining for themselves what the text means to them and their world, and proceed according to their ideas. Having an interest in Raymond Carver's short fiction and its gritty detail of life in late-twentieth century America, I wanted to find a place for the work in the wide spectrum of American literature, specifically exploring how Carver's work, loosely based in the 1970's and early 1980's, compares with the work of other pieces of American literature that appeared only years before. Another well-recognized twentieth American writer, Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse Five* as a reaction to his own personal experiences during World War II, describing the atrocities of war and its effects on those fighting. Published in 1969, *Slaughterhouse Five* to this day is recognized by many to be the quintessential model of postmodern literature, its fragmented style of storytelling and biting social satire serving as examples for the genre that gained popularity in the 1960s.

While Vonnegut's novel takes aim at the circumstances of war in a disjointed and almost humorous fashion, Carver works in a very different atmosphere. In his collection of short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver employs a stand-back approach with his stories, choosing to give the reader very little detail or background information, leaving the stories to focus solely on the present actions of each character. Many critics refer to this style as minimalist, a style that gives the reader only the necessities of the story and nothing more. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is the consummate representation of the minimalist genre, concentrating sparingly on the lives of Carver's characters. Considering the difference of style and substance, research comparing Vonnegut and Carver is minimal, if existent, and because of this gap, I feel it necessary to explore ways to bring these two famed writers closer together in a critical context. What I have chosen to do is examine these two celebrated late twentieth century novelists and look at their characters to see how they react to the situations that surround them. Whether it is young American men fighting in World War II or alcoholic, lower-class workers, both texts illustrate how late twentieth century American characters feel removed from reality, and as a response, escape into absurdity.

In terms of literary criticism, absurdity is the inability of a character to confront issues that surround him, often leaving the character to feel isolated and confused during bewildering situations. In essence, absurdity in the literary sense denotes the basic human condition of those living in the late twentieth century. It suggests that individuals can be a part of the action, yet at the same time feel cut off from everything that happens. With Vonnegut and Carver, one can see that although American characters can exist in a variety of locales and periods, one particular attribute that they all share is the failure to connect to the events that evolve around them, and with this failure to connect to reality comes a retreat into unexplainable situations.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut introduces the reader to Billy Pilgrim and his life, broken into smaller events that do not appear in any particular order. In a confusing manner that reflects the entire novel, Billy is able to travel to different moments in his life, often flashing back for only minutes to his past, simply to return to the present moments later. Fighting in World War II, Billy becomes a prisoner of war, and finds himself stuffed in a boxcar with other prisoners of war, some who are rapidly approaching death. While he sits confined to a corner of a soiled prison box, he escapes from reality and finds himself years later, sitting alone in his house late one night, watching an old war movie on television. "Billy saw the war movies backwards then forwards- and then it was time to go out into his backyard to meet the flying saucer" (Vonnegut 75). Within seconds, Billy is capable of leaving the existent world of torture and death to locate himself in a peaceful, serene environment where he watches an old war movie that moves backwards and then forwards. The escape becomes literal as his mind takes him away from his current condition, and by being able to leave the present and move through time, Billy enters into absurdity by escaping time and space, evident by his meeting with flying saucer. The flying saucer Billy encounters introduces the Tralfamadorians, a civilization from beyond Earth's galaxy. Upon boarding their saucer, Billy learns of the Tralfamadorian's methods and their understanding of time and free will. After only a brief meeting, Billy finds himself once again in the boxcar. "The terrific acceleration of the saucer as it left Earth twisted Billy's slumbering body, distorted his face, dislodged him in time,

sent him back to the war. When he regained consciousness, he wasn't on the flying saucer. He was in a boxcar crossing Germany again" (Vonnegut 77). There is not a linear element of time in *Slaughterhouse Five*, as Billy Pilgrim is free to move not only back and forth in time, but beyond reality. Billy escapes reality by visualizing a shift in time and location, finding himself transferred from a boxcar, to his house, and to a flying saucer. "Here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment," the Tralfamodorians pronounce. "There is no *why*" (Vonnegut 71). The Tralfamodorians' failure to provide an explanation to existence illustrates the absurdity of the novel. Billy Pilgrim never becomes able to comprehend the reality of war or its outcome, and therefore he must rely on the disjointed structure of his mind to escape into the absurd.

Carver fills *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* with characters often on the verge of collapse, struggling with common daily problems and the inability to connect with other people. In the short story "Viewfinder," the narrator greets a photographer with chrome hooks for hands at his door, and through the first half of the story, the narrator and the photographer tiptoe around subjects, never addressing any problems firsthand. The underlying issue is that both men were once married and both bear scars from that period, the narrator psychologically, the photographer physically. When an opportunity for the two to connect develops, the narrator asks the photographer to take his picture outside around his house. Finding himself on top of his house, the narrator finds a pile of rocks he believes to have been thrown by neighborhood children:

"Ready?" I called, and I got a rock, and I waited until he had me in his viewfinder.

"Okay!" he called.

I laid back my arm and I hollered, "Now!" I threw that son of a bitch as far as I could throw it.

"I don't know," I heard him shout. "I don't do motion shots."

"Again!" I screamed, and took up another rock. (Carver 15)

The narrator's apparent inability to cope with his problems culminates with this bizarre scene of emotional release. Carver places the narrator in a situation where he cannot come to terms with the reality of his life, and when the situation arises, absurdity ensues as he finds himself on his roof, throwing rocks in front a chrome-hook handed stranger, taking his picture.

Both *Slaughterhouse Five* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, as well as their authors, remain cornerstones of late twentieth century American fiction and to study these texts simultaneously not only is imperative for the sake of English, but the manner in which people look at late twentieth century life. Sometimes the best way to examine a certain period is by looking at the art that was produced at the same time, and observe how the art reflects the reality of those times. Looking at these two texts, readers recognize the fractured manner in which the characters react to the situations that arise around them. Although the characters exist at different times and locales, readers can recognize qualities that mirror their own, and draw a deeper understanding to themselves and the text through the actions of the characters.

References

[1] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. 1969. New York: Bantam, 1991.

[2] Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. 1981. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.