In 1988, a television series began exploring the possibilities of a man's time traveling within his own lifetime. The series was called Quantum Leap and the main character, Sam, was able to travel to various time periods from his birth to the time he started to time travel. Quantum Leap is strikingly similar to the 1969 novel, Slaughterhouse 5, by Kurt Vonnegut. This story tells of a man who travels, with the aid of an alien philosophy, within his own life span, from early childhood to even witnessing his own death several times. Slaughterhouse 5 carries themes involving an anti-war sentiment, death and its relationship to life, using metaphors, religious symbols and idiom repetition to bring his points across. The novel is also a fine example of meta-fiction.

Slaughterhouse 5 is recognizable as a work of meta-fiction because it is actually a book about a book. While comparisons are inevitably made between this work and Italo Calvino’s, If on a winter’s night a traveller, Vonnegut’s piece differs in that even though it does not exactly have a linear narrative, the narrative is actually more linear than the somewhat disorderly Calvino novel. That may not sound right but there is some way to follow Vonnegut’s novel. The story is about a book that is written by a World War Two survivor, who decides to write a novel about his experiences during the bombing of the German town of Dresden. The resulting novel, “The Children’s Crusade”, is then produced. This story reads more like a series of vaguely related vignettes than a chronologically ascending storyline. The reader is taken from Billy Pilgrim’s time in WW2 to the times both before and after the war. He even witnesses his own death, at the hands of a fellow prisoner of war, at least three or four times. Then there are the encounters with the aliens that abduct Pilgrim and show him in a zoo on their home world. The author himself makes an appearance, which adds to the meta-fictional value to the book. Other devices used are extracts from military textbooks, accompanying pictures and even a paragraph in German, with no translation provided. This passage could be viewed as a kind of literary Brechtian device, reinforcing the meta-fictional qualities of the novel.

The use of religion is a theme run throughout the novel as a device for Vonnegut to illustrate to the readers his experiences as a prisoner of war during WW2. The analogy he uses is the tale of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Vonnegut sees his book as a failure: it “had to be”, for “it was written by a pillar of salt” (p16). The thought of looking back is seen as all too human, Vonnegut himself playing the part of Lot’s wife, who looks back at the destruction wrought behind him, even though he should not. Thus, religion’s use in the story is as relevant to the author’s beliefs, which is enhanced by repetition.

Repetition plays a significant role in Slaughterhouse 5. The phrase is, “So it goes”, comes up again and again whenever death is mentioned. Several meanings could be given for the use of the expression. Firstly, it could be an almost blasé utterance, for while death occurs, life goes on around it. The phrase could also refer to the alien philosophy of the time/space continuum and how all events occur all at once. The utilization of the all-encompassing phrase can also be seen in the Muslim Koran, in the chapter, The Merciful (The Koran, p376-8). Here, the phrase “which of His (God’s) blessings would you deny?” appears at least 35 times over two pages. “So it goes” apparently appears about 100 times within Slaughterhouse 5. Though distantly related, these comparisons could reinforce the religious undertones of the novel. More subtle processes come in the form of symbolism.

Portraying German guards as owls, cooing softly to their trapped captives is an example of Vonnegut using symbols to aid in the understanding of the novel. While most people know what owls look and sound like, it is easy to imagine them in scenes described when Billy Pilgrim and his fellow Americans are being held and transported in the train carriages. Not many people reading the book would have actually experienced being a prisoner of war, thus, Vonnegut’s technique of describing the guards as such makes the unfamiliar easier to both imagine and understand.

Vonnegut’s injection of humour while turning the mirror onto his stark, traumatic past, makes this book a necessary didactic tool when discussing the movement against the nature of war. A timeless classic in its own right, Slaughterhouse 5 is as relevant now as it was when it was first published in 1969, and remains as relevant now as it was when it was published in 1961.
his experience in Dresden and meets O'Hare to fill in any possible blanks. The two men both come up with not many “good memories” (SH5, p10), which is not surprising. Repressing bad memories is way of avoiding reminders of the past.

There are also several references where Billy feels detached from his family, especially his daughter, Barbara and his wife, Valencia. Vonnegut may have also felt this detachment hence the detachment in Billy and also maybe needed prying in order to get him to talk about his experience. Peterson, Prout and Schwarz (1992, p23) find that “the sequelae of extreme trauma often include the survivors or victims being actively ignored, avoided or devalued.” Totally opposite to this statement are those two incidents to Billy. His daughter is actively seeking, not avoiding Billy (p20-1), while Billy’s wife is interested in what happened and told Billy she was proud of him (p.87-9):

> ‘I look at you sometimes,’ said Valencia, ‘and I get a funny feeling that you’re just full of secrets.’
> ‘I’m not,’ said Billy. That was a lie of course. He hadn’t told anybody about all the time-travelling he’d done, about Tralfamadore and so on.
> ‘You must have secrets about the war. Or, not secrets, I guess, but things you don’t want to talk about.’
> ‘No.’
> ‘I’m proud you were a soldier. Do you know that?’
> ‘Good.’ (SH5, p87)

Perhaps Vonnegut was ignored and avoided and therefore felt Billy should not be.

The final set of symptoms for PTSD is not shown in Billy Pilgrim. That does not mean they were not present in either Pilgrim or Vonnegut, but throughout the novel, no signs of them are clearly evident. The symptoms are known as Arousal symptoms and include:

- Sleep disturbance
- Anger and irritability
- Concentration problems
- Constantly looking out for danger
- Jumpy, easily startled (NCPTSD, 1999, p11)

Billy does seem to have some concentration problems though, which may count somewhat as an Arousal symptom. Apart from that, he seems to sleep well and shows none of the other symptoms in the Arousal symptom category.

According to different sources, the reasons for Vonnegut’s writing Slaughterhouse 5 are various and sometimes mysterious. Phillips (1997, p1) states flatly that the true reasons may remain unanswered. Dunston (1999, p3) gives it more thought and suggests that the novel offers a personal closure for Vonnegut on what he thought at the time in Dresden and consequently challenges the reader to feel the same way, possibly to come to the same conclusions about war that Vonnegut does. In much the same vane, Harris (no date given: cited in Lewis 1998, p3) offers the explanation that Vonnegut changes the narration when he appears (in the prison camp near Billy) for the same reason. Vonnegut went through the same thing as Billy, malnutrition, the bombing of Dresden while trapped in a small room and the mining of corpses and therefore wants people to relate to him through Billy’s happenings:

> An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later, he said, ‘There they go, there they go.’ He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. The author of this book. (Sh5, p91)

Leach (1994, p179) notes that: “Only when the symptoms persist, show resistance to recovery and impair the survivor’s ability to function in his everyday life, does the victim become classified as suffering PTSD”. Through his novel, Slaughterhouse 5, Kurt Vonnegut has given himself a chance to expel some of the feelings he has had bottled up since the time of his capture, his time in Dresden to the time of the end of the war. While no doubt, the effects on him have been deep-scarring and mentally horrific, the ability of the writer is not down to what he has gone through, since if it is through another character, is going to provide some sort of release and be just one step towards a normal life. Vonnegut, through Billy Pilgrim shows signs such as flashbacks, frightening themes, gaps in the memory, avoiding the topic of the trauma and some less emphasised concentration problems. His crusade may have started as a child, but Kurt Vonnegut’s duty-dance of death will go on for a while yet.

REFERENCES


http://www.geocities.com/hollywood/4953/kv_dream.html


Phillips, L. (1997), So it goes.