Irony And Satire In Slaughterhouse-Five

In “Slaughterhouse-Five”, Vonnegut uses ironic characterization through Billy Pilgrim’s character by comparing soldiers to children to neglect the stereotype of military veterans being courageous and hopeful. This is important because war itself is seen as serious with the outcome of achieving peace, however, Billy has a contrasting ideology of war being childish, in hopes of readers realizing the horrors of it.

Billy is described as “weak”, he is not a strong person mentally nor physically. In many ways, Billy is referred to as the opposite of being a hero, an anti-hero. In the novel he is described as “a funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth – tall and weak” (30), this inferring that he does not carry any heroic values such as bravery and strength, juxtaposing the idea of war novels containing a hero. As mentioned prior, Billy is simplistic, funny looking, who happens to get drafted into the war when isn’t suited for it. Looking closely at his name, Billy, this name seems very childlike especially coming from such a formal name of William. The use of Billy instead of William helps further emphasise to the reader how unheroic Billy is portrayed in the novel. As Billy was drafted into the war, he continued to develop this sense of inner childhood in himself, he constantly annoys his fellow soldiers causing much stress. Instead of being brave and responsible, Billy is persistently in need of saving, “…Billy wouldn’t do anything to save himself” (43). However, it seems that Billy is aware of his childish manners as he constantly requests his fellow soldiers to go on with the war, “go on without me” (43). Every description of Billy so far has neglected the stereotype of war veterans, Billy has no motivation to even get out of the war alive or even fight. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he is in hopes of dying, it simply shows to the reader that he did not have the mental capabilities of pulling through the war.

“Slaughterhouse-Five” could be inferred as a satire, Vonnegut comments on the effects of war by using dark humour in the hopes of drawing attention. This satirical is further seen in the first subtitle, “The Children’s Crusade”, the ‘children are the men who are behaving as such. This is seen not only through exposing Billy’s childlike actions, but also by classifying the other soldiers in the same category. Soldiers, in the American culture, are known to fight for justice, being courageous and strong, however in the novel, through Billy’s character, readers are drawn into the idea of soldiers being compared to as children. Billy describes the German soldiers as “boys in their early teens” (67), showing that during that time it was not only the American soldiers acting “foolish” but soldiers as a whole. This dismisses the ideology of soldiers which one’s most familiar. This continues through the imagery of soldiers singing during the war, “…they had been singing together every night for years” (119), unless an artist, singing is known to be a childlike behaviour, all children adore singing, especially with other children. This horrifies war since a child fools around when they don’t know what to do, this relates to the quote as soldiers are in shock and do not know how to cope in these situations.

The conveys in which the novel is written, does appeal to childlike behaviour as well as helps readers acknowledge the dreadfulness of war. Vonnegut’s structure does not contain autobiographical elements found in other novels, he simply expresses his experience through a frame story, through Billy Pilgrim’s narration. The purpose is of this structure is to be imperfect, to cope with the overwhelming events of the war. War seems to be all about seeking glory and

heroism to gain superiority, however, Billy makes it clear that there is nothing to say about such a massacre. The diction Billy uses to express the horrible and inexplicable events is through using simplistic and straightforward language, also relating to childish behaviour, as one may describe complex events in the language which may be used when explaining it to a child. The way Billy’s childish character is shown to be, shows war to be childish, not in the sense that it is not serious, but how people do not take it seriously for what it really is, just like people tend to not take children seriously. This forcing readers to understand the awful events of the war as if they were experiencing it themselves as reading the novel.