"THIS LOUSY LITTLE BOOK": THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF "SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE"
AS REVEALED IN CHAPTER ONE
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“THIS LOUSY LITTLE BOOK”: THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AS REVEALED IN CHAPTER ONE

T. J. MATHESON

Critics cannot agree on the meaning of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To Robert Merrill and Peter Scholl, the novel is best appreciated as a satire where “The object of satiric attack turns out to be a complacent response to the horrors of the age,”¹ in particular the Second World War. Though Dolores Gros-Louis agrees, seeing the novel as a plea for “active pacifism,”² Maurice O’Sullivan believes the solution offered is more personal and argues that “Vonnegut offers art as the only potential form of transcendence”³ from such horrors. In contrast, Robert Uphaus claims that Vonnegut, dealing “with the all-encompassing problem of human imagination pitted against the forces of historical extinction,”⁴ offers no clear solution to the problem, and Patrick Shaw, of all the critics the most pessimistic, concludes that “Vonnegut’s theme [is] that history, sex, religion, and life in general are all waste products of a world which is itself universally inconsequential.”⁵

Most critics are agreed that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a carefully structured work, while at the same time recognizing how difficult it is to determine the reasons behind the novel’s structural pattern. For both the structure of the work and the author’s treatment of his subject present many problems that do not admit to easy resolution. The first of these problems is encountered in the unusual opening chapter where Vonnegut, apparently speaking as himself, gives an account of the novel’s genesis that cannot help but strike us initially as being carelessly written and filled with irrelevant, peripheral observations that seem to lead nowhere. Attempts to account for the purpose of Chapter One and its importance to the rest of the novel have been limited. Charles Harris, in one of the best essays on *Slaughterhouse-Five*,⁶ is alone in investigating the matter in any detail. He shows that many of the images in the first chapter reappear later and is able to establish its importance accordingly. All the same, one is still left wondering why Vonnegut chose

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to introduce the novel in this way and is at something of a loss to explain how many of the seemingly random comments and observations relate to the rest of the book.

Upon inspection, it will be seen that the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is of great importance in providing us with a means of tracing the author’s evolving attitude both to the horrors of war and to the composition of his book as well. In this capacity, it outlines an artist’s developing moral and aesthetic responses to a major aspect of the age in which he lived. Just as importantly, it also contains suggestions as to how we should respond intellectually and morally to war in particular and evil generally. For Vonnegut’s theme is not as obscure as the structure of the work might imply. Indeed, there is every indication that his most fundamental concern is more traditional than has hitherto been assumed and is not so much with achieving “Henri Bergson’s world of pure inner duration” or even with the “psychological impact of time, death, and uncertainty”—though these elements are undoubtedly present—but simply with the problem of living in the midst of, and responding in a responsible manner to, evil as it is encountered in the modern world.

It should be noted that there is little agreement concerning the relationship of the narrator—who purports to be Vonnegut himself—to the novel as a whole. Donald Greiner believes the book was “written in Vonnegut’s own voice,” but to O’Sullivan “The ‘I’ of the first chapter is no more a perfect parallel of Vonnegut than the personae of many other works are to their authors. . . .” Rather, he is “a consciously crafted figure.” This latter view seems more likely to be the case; it is a view shared by Harris, who is without question correct to argue “that the Vonnegut of Chapter One is, indeed, a character in *Slaughterhouse-Five.*” But if he is a distinct character, it is also important to realize he is one to whom we are meant to respond ironically. There are several hints of this in the opening paragraphs. Even the first sentences of Chapter One are designed to give the reader pause, for we are informed that “All this happened, more or less,” and that “The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true.” Since writers do not as a rule remind us of the extent to which their work is a fictional construct and not literally “true,” Vonnegut may be trying to alert the reader to the fact that the naturalistic details of the book are not of primary importance, as they tend to be in many war novels. Furthermore, in that the comment distances the narrator from the subject of his narration, it enables us to see him as an entity distinct from the story he will subsequently tell and having an importance all his own.

If they missed this clue, even obtuse readers could not fail to be alerted when the narrator remarks that “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time” (p. 2). Since such a contemptuous reference to a novel by the novelist himself is not something
we normally encounter, the reader can safely conclude that Vonnegut is speaking ironically and is not making a straightforward statement about the novel’s literary worth, for if he genuinely did regard it as inferior—the usual meaning of the slang term “lousy”—he would surely not publish it in a form he found unsatisfactory. Obviously then, since the very appearance of the book is proof that Vonnegut regards it seriously, it is plain that he is not using the word “lousy” in the usual way. Since he does not appear to be speaking sarcastically, we are led to ask how the book might be “lousy” while not also being inferior. It is this question the remainder of Chapter One is concerned with answering.

Paradoxically, though here the narrator has just stated an apparent reluctance to outline the history of the novel’s composition and his relationship to it, he proceeds to do just that and describes this history in considerable detail, in the process of which it becomes evident that we are also reading a history of the development of his character, as revealed through his evolving intellectual and artistic relationship not only to the book, but also to the central experience on which the book was based, the bombing of Dresden. As far as his actual character is concerned, Vonnegut wishes us to see the narrator (as a young man) as having been shallow, materialistic, and immature, and more than a little insensitive, for it is plain he initially regarded his war experiences as important primarily in terms of how they could advance his writing career. As a young man fresh from the Front, he naively “thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (p. 2). With equal naïveté, he conceived his novel originally in epic terms suggestive of Gone With the Wind, “since the subject was so big,” and thought it would virtually write itself and of its own accord emerge a “masterpiece” or at least make him “a lot of money.” Epic war novels that make their authors rich likely have a mass appeal. To achieve this appeal, one suspects some sort of romantic sugarcoating of events—many of which are intrinsically grisly, horrid, and far from glamorous—must often take place, whereby they are rendered palatable to a mass audience. Evidently, the young author originally conceived his novel in such terms, probably as a romantic work that, if no true masterpiece, would nevertheless enjoy wide sales, in a word, a potboiler. However, “not many words” came from his mind, suggesting both that he soon learned it is not easy to write—about Dresden or anything else, for that matter—and also that on a deeper level, there was for all his immaturity a sense somewhere of moral and artistic responsibility to the events concerned.

The narrator then returns us to his present, reminding us that he has aged, having “become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown” (p. 2), presumably of an age to fight in yet another war. The real Vonnegut, incidentally, can scarcely be considered all that old (in 1968 he was forty-six), a discrepancy alerting us again to the distinc-
tion between the real novelist and his fictional narrator-persona. But what of his memories? Musing on the uselessness of his Dresden experiences, he is led inexplicably to recall a mildly vulgar limerick together with the well-known nonsense song "Yon Yonson":

There was a young man from Stamboul,
Who soliloquized thus to his tool:
"You took all my wealth
And you ruined my health,
And now you won't pee, you old fool."

* * * * * * * * * *

My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin,
I work in a lumbermill there,
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, "What's your name?"
And I say,
"My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin."
And so on to infinity. (pp. 2-3)

Critics have experienced an understandable difficulty accounting for the relevance of the limerick; surely Rubens' dismissal of it as merely "scatalogical"13 is insufficient, given the prominence obviously attached to it. It will be noted that the poem deals explicitly with penile dysfunction, presumably as a consequence of excessive sexual activity, expressed comically and employing the child's common euphemism for urination. Obviously a now-older man, for whom the possibility of sexual dysfunction is not so remote and as such not so easily laughed at, is revealing himself as perhaps a bit self-conscious about his advancing age and the possible loss of potency therein. But there is also a hint that in the very irrelevance of the memory recalled, Vonnegut is making a subtle point about the fallibility of the human memory and its inability to retain a sense of perspective or stay on subjects of great importance for any length of time. It is also interesting to note that in Legman's definitive collection of limericks, the example in question does not appear, suggesting, however obliquely, that the narrator is wrong to regard it as "famous" and that his sense of perspective is perhaps askew.14

With the "Yon Yonson" poem much the same points can be made, but in this latter example the preoccupation with irrelevance could be perpetuated to infinity, given the endlessly repetitive nature of the song. Surely the entire section is highly ironic, for what we have been presented with is a discussion of memory by a narrator who, though thinking of himself as laden with significant memories, is able only to recall nonsense rhymes and quite likely imperfectly at that.15 The human mind has an inevitable tendency, it seems, to lose sight of the past, try as we might to keep it in view.
The narrator’s inability to recall where his old girlfriends live also attests to this imperfection of memory. But the most compelling evidence of this deficiency is seen in his attempt to stimulate his memory of the war by having a reunion with Bernard O’Hare, his old war buddy. Although ostensibly a sincere effort to face the past, it is plain that his approach to the proposed book is not yet well thought out. That he is taking neither the events of the war themselves nor the writing of the novel very seriously is suggested by the fact that he is drunk when he first contacts O’Hare. Childishness is also evident in the narrator’s very diction, as seen when he explains to O’Hare that he would ‘‘like some help remembering stuff’ ’ (p. 4).

It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that the novel as he originally conceived it was to have had a form, tone, and structure far different from that which Slaughterhouse-Five eventually assumed. By the narrator’s own account, it appears to have been conceived along the lines of a conventional, popular war novel, full of action and suspense, easily understood by an unsophisticated reader and culminating in a conclusion wherein all issues appear to be resolved. It is plain, however, that the narrator will receive no help in this direction from the more mature O’Hare, a man too sensitive to the horrors of war ever to collaborate with a writer who would trivialize such experiences in fiction. Virtually alone among the prisoners of war, ‘‘O’Hare didn’t have any souvenirs,’’ possibly because war was so hideous to him that he refused to acquire any kind of booty or trophy that might become glamorous with the passage of time. Lest we miss this point, souvenir-hunting itself is portrayed as being either revoltingly ghoulish, in the case of the deranged Paul Lazzaro who ‘‘had about a quart of diamonds and emeralds and rubies’’ taken ‘‘from dead people in the cellars of Dresden’’ (p. 5), or simply vulgar and garish, like the Englishman so impressed over his worthless and tawdry ‘‘plaster model of the Eiffel Tower.’’ Notably, the young narrator also possessed a souvenir.

Understandably, O’Hare is ‘‘unenthusiastic’’ about the reunion and claims ‘‘he couldn’t remember much’’ (p. 4), possibly because the memories are so painful, but more likely because he senses that the book the narrator is planning to write, as described, will fail to do justice to the truth. O’Hare has every reason to suspect the narrator of intending to exploit the war for his own purposes. There is something unmistakably unfeeling in the way the narrator alludes so enthusiastically to the death of ‘‘poor old Edgar Derby’’ (p. 4), seeing it as an event important solely in terms of its irony and its resulting suitability as a possible climax for his novel, having more literary than human significance to him. This callous and cynical attitude to death suggests the narrator is not taking the war all that seriously; little genuine feeling is evident as he speaks. His very enthusiasm over the subject indicates he does not feel very deeply about it; one feels the sheer magnitude of the carnage ought to have a more sobering effect on a truly mature man. For
that matter, the very importance he attaches to the novel’s climax is significant when we recall that the word as a literary term usually heralds the appearance of the denouement, wherein all is resolved or unravelled. Clearly, the narrator himself intends to give the appearance in his novel of resolving issues that a more sensitive individual would see were beyond any such simplistic resolution, if they were resolvable at all. When asked ‘‘where the climax should come’ ’’ O’Hare replies drily, ‘‘ That’s your trade, not mine’ ’’ (p. 4), his use of the word ‘‘trade’’ revealing his awareness of the extent to which the narrator’s methods are, after all, more those of a mechanic or laborer than of a truly creative artist.

At this point, the narration shifts again to the novelist’s present, from which vantage point the older narrator, seeing his initial approach to the novel’s composition from a better perspective, recognizes himself as having been nothing more than a would-be ‘‘trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations . . .’’ (p. 4). Vonnegut’s use of the word ‘‘trafficker’’ is particularly apposite, for in addition to the immediate suggestion of a dealer in illicit drugs, one of the meanings of the word ‘‘traffic’’ is ‘‘unlawful or improper trade.’’ Since a trafficker, then, is one who engages in improper trade—precisely as the astute O’Hare recognized, one notes—a ‘‘trafficker’’ in literature must be a writer who presents for consumption something artistically improper, a kind of literary contraband or drug. It follows that any war novel designed as the narrator originally conceived his, to be merely thrilling and suspenseful, providing a merely pleasurable experience for the reader, is also a drug of sorts in that the reader’s responses are beingulled as effectively as the body is by a chemical opiate.

The drugging process alluded to is not the product simply of an author having romanticized war and its participants. Even the normal method of structuring a historical novel—especially a war novel—with a strict reliance on chronology, of necessity will present the reader with an illusion of logic and meaning by virtue of the apparent causal pattern therein. This positioning of the events of war in relation to their chronological sequence appears to give a coherence to the totality of the experiences themselves and makes sense of a series of occurrences that have no rational basis, as far as Vonnegut is concerned. Significantly, the ‘‘best outline’’ the young narrator ever made—presumably by ‘‘best’’ he means the most complete and symmetrical ordering of the events—he also describes as the ‘‘prettiest one,’’ that is, the one most superficially attractive to the mind. This particular outline is drawn on a roll of wall paper with his daughter’s crayons, hinting that the very attempt to find such order is a puerile activity. Although Vonnegut’s description of the outline seems to belabor the obvious—‘‘One end of the wall paper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle’’ (p. 5)—it is inserted to
draw our attention to how the war as depicted would visually appear as the wallpaper scroll was unrolled. Each event would pass quickly before our eyes, first in and then out of sight: ‘‘The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side’’ (p. 5). The vertical band itself, of course, along with the many thousands of implied lines that were not still alive, all disappear conveniently as the scroll is turned, located as the event is on only one point on the wallpaper.

In thus reducing the destruction of Dresden to one of many events specific in space and time, the outline also reduces it in importance, allowing it to be seen and then dismissed as something that was merely part of a causal process that otherwise ends happily with the release of the still-living prisoners of war. The horror of the fire bombing, the countless deaths, the magnitude of the carnage and the evil behind it: all have been safely rolled away and consigned to oblivion. Interestingly enough, as the narrator recalls this original plan for the book, he does not stop neatly at the point where the novel as originally conceived was to close, but continues, returning us again to the immediate present, seeing himself as before as an ‘‘old fart’’ and recalling the ‘‘Yon Yonson’’ poem once more, a recollection that indicates he has since learned that he lives not in a world where events can disappear conveniently from his consciousness once they have been experienced, but one where even trivial events through memory keep returning to consciousness, in the sense suggested both by the endless circularity of the song and by his repeated recollection of it. Moreover, particularly unpleasant or unsettling memories cannot be dismissed by honest individuals and must form part of the baggage all sensitive men and women carry with them as a consequence of their sensitivity. Such people recognize that there are certain occurrences which, through their sheer magnitude, contain a kind of eternal relevance and must be acknowledged as forever important; what they tell us about the human condition is simply too valuable to be allowed to forget.

At the same time, there are many forces in society working to encourage such forgetfulness. As a civilian attempting to learn why Dresden was bombed, the narrator encounters resistance everywhere from military public relations men. Public relations itself is presented in Slaughterhouse-Five as a profession almost exclusively concerned with suppressing truth; importantly, the narrator after the war was in public relations. His boss in PR, we are told, joins the Dutch Reformed Church. This seemingly irrelevant bit of information, upon reflection, can be seen as ironically appropriate in light of that institution’s Calvinistic emphasis on the total depravity of man. For that matter, the boss, through his profession and his attitude to war—an officer (in PR!) during the war, he sneers at the narrator for not having been an officer too—becomes himself convincing proof that the church’s assumptions about human evil are correct.
With his conventionally attired little girls, the narrator appears at the O’Hare house, expecting a comfortable evening of drink, good fellowship, and pleasant reminiscences. To his surprise Mary O’Hare, refusing to cater to his expectations, seats them on “two straight-backed chairs at a kitchen table with a white porcelain top. That table top was screaming with reflected light from a two-hundred watt bulb overhead” (p. 11), a far cry from the snug and cozy scene the narrator had sentimentally imagined, of “two leather chairs near a fire in a paneled room, where two soldiers could drink and talk” (p. 11). Unwilling to provide the narrator with an atmosphere conducive to nostalgia, Mary O’Hare presents them with “an operating room,” the better to examine (and perhaps dissect) their memories honestly. O’Hare himself is unable to drink and as such cannot enter into the world of alcoholic sentimentality the narrator had anticipated. Not surprisingly, under such conditions neither man “could remember anything good” (p. 12), because in truth nothing good can ever be said of war. At this point Mary, angrily aware of the tendency in popular novels to find something of positive value in war, accuses the narrator of intending to do likewise and ignore the fact that wars are not fought by “‘glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men’” but by babies, “‘foolish virgins . . . at the end of childhood’” (p. 13). Mary recognizes that the very attempt to romanticize such horrors makes them palatable to a subsequent generation of “babies” who, ignorant of the hideous realities, rush headlong into new wars in a pathetic and misguided attempt to gain experience they mistakenly conclude their forefathers found meaningful.

At this point, the narrator attains a new level of understanding. To his credit, he both recognizes and sympathizes with what angered Mary and vows that he will write a book for which no parts could be played by Frank Sinatra or John Wayne, two actors we easily associate with typically unsophisticated and glamorous war movies. Furthermore, he promises to subtitle his book “The Children’s Crusade” in acknowledgment of what Mary has taught him.

Once having seen this, the narrator’s approach to his subject begins to change dramatically. In curiosity, he and O’Hare turn to an account of the original Children’s Crusade, Charles Mackay’s Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds (London, 1841), wherein much is made of the vast difference between the dispassionate historical record which reveals the Crusades as a particularly distasteful chapter in human history—the Children’s Crusade was nothing more than the result of an attempt by two cynical monks to sell homeless children into slavery in Africa—and the romantic account, which “dilates upon their piety and heroism, and portrays, in her most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great service they [supposedly] rendered to Christianity” (p. 14). Later that night he reads a
history of Dresden left at his bedside by O’Hare which further sensitizes him to the fact that man’s inhumanity to man is a recurring, if not also permanent, aspect of the human condition, be it manifested in the Children’s Crusade, the destruction of Dresden by Frederick the Great, or even the American Revolutionary War. Through this reading, the narrator comes to see that there are, broadly speaking, two approaches he can take to historical manifestations of evil, one straightforward, the other disingenuous: he can face all the facts squarely, letting them speak for themselves, or he can edit history by romanticizing or flatly ignoring events that are intrinsically sordid, unpleasant, or ugly, as he had originally intended to do.

At the World’s Fair, the narrator encounters displays portraying “what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney” (p. 16). These allusions are particularly appropriate when we recall Henry Ford’s contemptuous dismissal of history as “bunk” and are reminded of the Disney Studio’s sentimental—but very profitable!—interpretations of American history; both are essentially exploiting the past in a manner that reminds us of how far the narrator has progressed beyond his initial approach to his subject. His ensuing question about time—“how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep” (p. 16)—also serves to reveal his new awareness that the past is not his personal property which he has a right to manipulate or dispose of irresponsibly.

Following his meeting with O’Hare, the narrator spent time at the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa, initially still at work on his “famous book about Dresden” (p. 16). But the O’Hares have had a lasting effect on his original plan for the novel; upon completion, he refers simply to it as “the book,” “short and jumbled and jangled . . . because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (p. 17). Of course, by speaking of his novel as jumbled, Vonnegut is not implying that the structure is unplanned and truly meaningless, that the novel is poorly thought-out or unintelligible, or that Slaughterhouse-Five is the work of a moral cynic and aesthetic nihilist. For the narrator adds in strong and unequivocal language a statement indicating that his abhorrence of war is absolute and unqualified, having told his “sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee” (p. 17, my italics). Chaotic though the book may appear, it was neither conceived nor put together indifferently, at least in its final form. On the contrary, the apparently haphazard movement of the novel, the purposeful violation of normal chronological sequence, and the absence of conventional attitudes regarding the subject matter, are all purposefully inserted to prevent the reader from emerging from the work with a comfortable sense that moral order has been restored with the ending of the war, or that the factors that precipitated the carnage have been resolved or eradicated.
The narrator-author has also come to see that almost all historical war novels distort the truth in conveying the impression that objective order and rationality prevail, just because various occurrences such as the events of World War II can be arranged on the basis of their chronological sequence. Even acknowledging the premise that a war has a beginning, a middle, and an end in a novel could detract from our ability to comprehend fully the actual madness behind it. To prevent all of this from happening in his own war novel, Vonnegut tampers throughout with temporal structure, presents us with a non-hero so weak and passive it is impossible not to regard him with ambivalence, and denies this figure even the ability to remain rooted in causal time. But Billy’s inability to put the events of time forever behind him is a trait shared by the reader of Slaughterhouse-Five, who is also at the mercy of the “Tralfamadorian” structure of the novel as engineered by the author, where all key events—the bombing of Dresden, the death of Edgar Derby, etc.—are repeated again and again. That the reader is never allowed to lose sight of these events reinforces what is surely one of Vonnegut’s main themes in the novel: that since man’s destructive nature is always with us, events should never be forgotten, if we are ever to stand a chance of preventing them from recurring.

As a means of keeping the memory of Dresden fresh in his mind, Vonnegut and O’Hare make plans to return to that city. Waiting for his delayed plane in a hotel, the narrator remarks that “The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again” (p. 18). Here, Vonnegut is reminding us that there are many ways of viewing time. Our common perception of it as a linear procession of discrete but causally linked events, where the past is generally regarded accordingly as less relevant to us than the present, is arbitrary and only a convention we adopt for convenience’s sake. Although we must submit to the convention for practical purposes—the narrator sees that “As an Earthling, [he] had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (p. 18)—this does not mean that past and present are not of equal importance. Doubtless for this reason he is often ignorant of the time, seeing as he does that “knowing what time it is” and being able to place oneself securely in time provide us with a potentially deceptive security and a not very valuable kind of knowledge.

Two books the narrator takes with him to Dresden also influence his final conception of the novel. From the first, a volume of Theodore Roethke’s poetry, the narrator quotes the following lines from “The Waking”:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go. (p. 18)
Here, what impresses the narrator is Roethke's recognition that the sensitization of consciousness is related directly to facing what one must face, that integrity consists in part in choosing or deciding to embark on a path one has come to see as essential both to one's growth and one's being.

The second passage, taken from Celine (another author scarred by an earlier war), is also relevant; the narrator recalls "the amazing scene in Death on the Installment Plan where Celine wants to stop the bustling of a street crowd. He screams on paper, Make them stop . . . don't let them move anymore at all . . . There, make them freeze . . . once and for all! . . . So that they won't disappear anymore!" (pp. 18-19). What bothers Celine and now the narrator as well is the notion of time's events as consisting of movement first in and then out of consciousness. Celine's desire to stop the crowd on the street—in itself a most appropriate metaphor for time as perpetual flux—is the expression of a wish to extricate himself from the movement of present events into the irretrievable past, to "freeze" or suspend time in one's consciousness to keep it from being lost forever. In a sense, the final structure of Slaughterhouse-Five is an attempt to do just that, by moving beyond the wallpaper outline and satisfying Celine's demand that the crowd be "stopped." By continually reminding us throughout the novel of the slaughter that occurred in Dresden, by telling us of his originally intended climax—the absurd death of Edgar Derby—in the opening paragraph and reminding us of it repeatedly, and by never allowing readers the luxury of putting the novel's atrocities into our own intellectual "pasts," he keeps the eternal importance of the horror together with his own message constantly before our eyes.

The narrator then turns to the Bible for one of the first recorded "firebombings" in history, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this final recollection, past and present meet. Like Lot's wife, also permanently devastated by what she saw—he describes himself as a "pillar of salt" (p. 19)—he too is one who dared to look back whatever the consequences and write his "lousy little book," a failure in popular, conventional terms, containing no suspense, no climax as such, and no surprises in plot. Even Billy's unusual relationship to time is discussed at the outset of Chapter Two, and the first few pages go on to delineate with scrupulous fidelity to chronology the major events in Billy's life, thus getting the mere sequence of events out of the way, as it were, and virtually forcing the reader to concentrate on the more important aspects of the book. The final sentences of Chapter One, containing the cryptic first and last sentences of the novel that follows, remind us that terms like "beginning" and "end" have no meaning or importance as far as this novel is concerned. But, in preventing us from enjoying his war novel in the usual way, the very unsettling nature of the ensuing work does far greater justice to the subject matter and enables
us to see the permanent, lasting evil of war with a greater degree of clarity and to respond with more sensitivity to it than we would otherwise have been able to do.

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NOTES


7 Philip M. Rubens, "Nothing's Ever Final: Vonnegut's Concept of Time," College Literature, 6 (1979), 64-72.

8 Harris, p. 228.


10 O'Sullivan, p. 245.

11 Harris, p. 230.


13 Rubens, p. 68.

14 The one similar reference to penile dysfunction that does appear in Legman is expressed in explicit, sexually coarse language: to wit, "But now you've quit fucking, you fool!" See G. Legman, ed., The Limerick: 1700 Examples, with Notes, Variants, and Index (New York: Bell, 1969), note to limerick #1098, p. 435.

15 Is it possible that Vonnegut has purposely left out half of the sixth line of "Yon Yonson"? Although there is no authoritative source for this nonsense song, the version I (and others) recall runs as follows: "They say 'What's your name?' / And I say just the same, / 'My name is Yon Yonson, . . .' " etc. Obviously, the addition to the line completes the metric regularity of the song; the version the narrator recalls is more jarring, and, if consciously left out by Vonnegut, might be designed to alert us to the fact that the narrator has forgotten part of a line.
Edward A. Kopper, Jr. ("Operation Gomorrah in Slaughterhouse-Five," *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 8, No. 4 [1978], 6) has made the interesting suggestion that the cities of Hamburg and Dresden, both firebombed during the war, are a modern equivalent of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, and offers as proof the fact that the "name of the Allied operation against the city of Hamburg was 'Gomorrah,'" thus justifying Vonnegut's allusion to the Old Testament cities further and adding to our sense of history as endlessly repetitive and of evil as perpetually present.

Vonnegut, at the time he wrote these words, could not have predicted the tremendous commercial success his novel would enjoy.