Teaching A Censored Novel:
Slaughterhouse Five

Donald B. Veix

Before we get into our discussion of censorship and *Slaughterhouse Five*, you may be interested in what literature was being censored in the years 1943-1945 when Billy Pilgrim was in the U.S. Army. The following titles are from *Publishers' Weekly, Harper's, Newsweek and Nation*: “Boston Bans Forever Amber,” “Censorship down under,” “First Lady Chatterly Case,” “Strange Fruit ban lifted in Detroit,” “Studs Lonigan Puzzles the N.Y. Police,” “MacArthur and the Censorship,” “Rome Hanks removed from sale by Boston booksellers,” Letters to the editors: “Soldiers object to censorship.” In 1942 the Third Reich banned the sending of *Studs Lonigan* (the trilogy) to American prisoners of war.

A New York-based textbook publisher says that the teaching of English in some states has become insipid. The curriculum is arranged so the student never reads about drugs, liquor, love or life. This leaves him with pets and mountains. He can walk into a class on physics or math and expect to learn something real. But in English and social studies he encounters a never-never land in which the books have little relationship to life at the corner or life behind the barn. In the Texas Bible Belt the books publishers wish to sell to schools are displayed for several months in libraries throughout the state for parents to review. Feminists, blacks, whites, Chicanos, super-patriots, police, etc. have at them. The state textbook committee votes and often the textbook offerings are left off the state approved list. A local board can still buy unapproved books but loses state financial aid. Publishers have little choice. They cannot delete or bowdlerize profanity, for example, since copyrighted materials cannot be altered.¹


Is *Slaughterhouse Five* a great book? Is it worth all the trouble that may come from teaching it? First, it may not be important at all if it is or isn't a great book. What is important is that the English teacher may *think* it is, and the teaching (or lack of teaching) of English that he will do after he is admonished may do far greater harm to our culture than what censors feel might happen if he actually teaches *Slaughterhouse Five*. Mr. Severy, the English teacher of *Slaughterhouse Five* in Drake, North Dakota, has not had his contract renewed. His attitude? “I'm really fed up with trying to do my job and getting shafted.”² Where will he teach now, and how will he approach problem books? Perhaps more important is what the tenth grade students in his English class, the high school students in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and the poet in Rider College’s *Venture* learned about the real world after their encounter with the censors. In *Crisis in the Classroom* Silberman says that students learn not from what we tell them but from what they see us do, how they see us interact: teachers with students, teachers with administrators.³

For me, *Slaughterhouse Five* is a great contemporary novel. Why? Well it says something about World War II, an event that fascinates me; it says things about our society, real things, in a very funny way. Structurally, it is contemporary in the way that the past, the present, and the future drift and blur together. I like art whose structure is true to its content. *Slaughterhouse


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F * is that for me. Vonnegut is also whimsical, and I like whimsy. Maybe Billy Pilgrim is part of Mr. Average or Mr. Everyman—me. Most important, Slaughterhouse Five grabs me. I enjoy teaching it.

Slaughterhouse Five, like great satires, holds a mirror up to our society and the image is repulsive. We are Americans in the book, but we are also Germans and Western man. Werner Gluck, the young German soldier, is a Dresden boy, actually Billy's distant cousin.4 The book shows us as phonies, mass murderers piously proclaiming our sacred causes, members of a material society that destroys culture. Dresden, after all, is a museum before the bombers come. Perhaps censors sense (!) the subtle criticisms but find the dirty words and explicit sexual references easier targets toward which to rally the book burners. Attacking the subtleties might be an admission that flaws really exist.

At the conclusion of a dissertation on censorship and Catcher in the Rye, James Symula notes that (1) Censorship is based on ignorance—ignorance of the author's purpose, and ignorance of the student's ability to think and judge for himself, and (2) English teachers must lead the fight against censorship. 5

In order to dispel this ignorance, English teachers might run adult classes which deal with censorship, human thought, or Slaughterhouse Five. A publication sent to the parents discussing literature being taught and including essays on freedom and censorship is also a possibility. More important is a knowledge of the depths of ignorance in a given community, its values and mores, and disseminating that knowledge to members of the English department.

English teachers must discuss within their department their own attitudes toward intellectual freedom and censorship. They should agree on a censorship policy and place it in force. The NCTE publication “The Students' Right to Read” provides guidelines. As a high school English teacher I find it intelligent. It must have been forged in hot fires. It requests that complainants make their complaints in writing, requires them to read the entire book, asks if they are aware of the judgment of literary critics of the book in question, gives a series of choices about the disposition of the book, asks what books the complainants would put in its place, and provides for signatures.6 The approach seems to work. One of our student teachers used it the first year I ordered it for new English teachers. She phoned the college quite excited over a parental complaint, and I recommended the NCTE form. After she talked to the complaining parent a second time and invited her to file a written complaint, the matter was dropped.

However, the main issues should not be the forms we use but rather the philosophies we espouse. What is the purpose of the literature we teach? What is the purpose of literature per se? Is the function of the English teacher—any teacher, as Socrates saw it—to be a goad, to vex his students, to awaken them?

Whom can I trust? Can the librarian be trusted? Charles Henry Busha in his 1967 doctoral dissertation at Indiana University on public librarians' attitudes toward intellectual freedom and censorship studied over three thousand public librarians in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Wisconsin. Although these are public librarians and not school librarians, I'm guessing that their attitudes are not dissimilar. His conclusions aren't encouraging: Only 2% of the librarians expressed strong anti-censorship attitudes; 4% were sympathetic toward censorship; 64% were neither highly favorable nor unfavorable toward censorship. Librarians who tended to agree with authoritarian beliefs tended to approve censorship measures.7 Thus many school libraries become authoritarian strongholds; quiet and order and draconian rules are applied. Like the English teacher, the librarian who is too liberal does not have his or her contract renewed; the authoritarian librarian who favors selective book censorship tends to survive.

A 1973 article in the Library Journal by Patrick Williams and J. T. Pearce took a conservative stand that is disturbing, to say the least: “The values of freedom of expression and inquiry are irreducibly relative, relative to the rights of others, to time, place, circumstance, and any other factor which can legitimately be introduced. . . . Censorship is necessary and desir-
able as well as inevitable.”8 Williams and Pearce added further that librarians who did not agree with their conclusions should not be honored as professional librarians. While not all librarians by a long shot share these views, there seems to be too little realization that librarians themselves have frequently been responsible for censorship.

Whom can I trust? Can I trust the administrator? Many of the most innovative English teachers I’ve encountered do not trust the chairmen, supervisors or principals for whom they work. As a result, there are few daring teachers of English in secondary schools, and fewer yet in elementary schools. In a system where I taught, the superintendent required a written plan submitted in advance if an English teacher wanted to teach Catcher in the Rye. An English teacher had once written The Word on a blackboard while the superintendent observed her class. He never forgot. The bookroom copies of Catcher were never renewed. The pile of tattered copies was gradually eroded, given to and stolen by students who wanted to read the book, perhaps to savor The Word privately.

However, I would trust the chief administrator in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The Superintendent, David Weingast, had a well organized policy for responding to complaints about material used in the Ridgefield school system. Despite his willingness to discuss the problems with the President of Concerned Parents, he was caught up in a whirlwind of controversy generated by organizations outside Ridgefield. He lost his job. In matters of censorship I would not trust the superintendent, Mr. Fuhrman, in Drake, North Dakota. In the March 1974 NJEA Review, he concedes that “Slaughterhouse (Five) was excellently written. . . . We handled it very clumsily. There’s no doubt about that. Instead of burning them we could have put them on the shelf and it wouldn’t have hit the news at all.”9

Whom can I trust? The School Board? In the Areopagitica, John Milton comments:

“He who kills a good Booke, kills reason itselfe, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye . . . We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labors of publickmen, how we spell that season’d life of man preserv’d and stor’d up in Books; since we see a kind of homicide may be thus committed, . . .”10

Let’s see how two boards of education fit into John Milton’s category. In Ridgefield, Connecticut, a written policy for handling controversial literature existed. Yet, when the President of Concerned Parents appeared before the Board and demanded to be heard, despite the fact he had not followed procedures, the Board gave him the floor. The attack on an ancient history teacher’s LSD ditto became an attack on the English department’s Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver and the book Police Courts and the Ghetto. Despite pressure from the John Birch Society, Citizens for Decent Literature, Billy James Hargis’ Christian Crusade and The Church League of America, the Board refused to withdraw the books, but then reversed itself, voting five to three to suspend the two courses where the books were taught.11 In Drake, North Dakota, the five member school board ordered thirty copies of Slaughterhouse Five retrieved from the tenth grade English class of Mr. James Severy. The books were burned, the standard method of disposal of unusable textbooks in many school districts. In addition the board recalled James Dickey’s Deliverance and an anthology of short stories.12

What of the federal government’s attitude toward censorship? The Justice Department granted $137,625 to California Lutheran College to establish a National Legal Data Center. Justice Department officials said the purpose of the Center was “to provide legal and tactical support to prosecutors in obscenity cases.” Supporters of the grant, “Pilot Project on Obscenity,” hoped to establish a national clearinghouse for obscenity prosecutions. The Center collects, analyzes, and disseminates information and provides assistance to local authorities in the prosecution of obscenity cases.13 Six full time book reviewers screen newly published books with a view to their suitability. Yet, only seventy of thousands published each month make the recommended books list. Books that raise questions about U. S. policy and might be “misunderstood” or prove offensive are not included. Among the censored books have been Big Sur and The Oranges of Hieronymous Bosch by Henry Miller and Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone by James Baldwin. The reviewer for Big Sur said, “His [Miller’s] anti-American civilization attitude

9Newlund, pp. 21.

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12Newlund, pp. 21-22.
makes this volume of doubtful program use." The reviewer for Tell Me: "My countrymen impressed me as being, on the whole, the emptiest and most unattractive people in the world."14

How to teach Slaughterhouse Five in an American English classroom? There are a number of triggers in the book, anti-personnel mines hidden in the snow of this Ardennes. Stepping on any of these devices can be fatal to the tenure of the English teacher. As a guide, let's take one of Ken Donelson's listing of areas that will trigger censorship.15 Donelson accurately sees language as one area of controversy. This seems to be what slaughtered Slaughterhouse in Drake! The school board clerk said, "We don't need that kind of language to build hatred for war."16 In Texas (below the heartland) a high school principal objected to an article appearing in a student newspaper, Space City. The article had this caption "High Skool [sic] is fucked." In denying that the word had any reference to sexual intercourse, the plaintiff put a professor of linguistics from Rice University on the stand. He testified that the article meant the school is in "bad shape, in a pretty lousy state of affairs." The court (Sullivan vs. Ind. School District, Texas, 1971) said: "... what is obscene is that material, whether sexual or not, that has as its basic motivation and purpose the degradation, debasement and dehumanizing of persons." The court went on to say that the dirtiest word in the English language was not "fuck" or "shit" but rather the word "nigger" when said by a sneering Sheriff Bull Connor.17 In 1971, an article in Christian Century argued: "Certainly there are obscenities in Slaughterhouse Five but none so great that it can begin to match the obscenity of the Dresden raid itself or the self righteousness of Moore's judicial interference in the selection of literature for school use."18 What was obscene in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and Drake, North Dakota? Was it the books taught or the killing of the books? Was it the profanity taken out of context or the lobotomizing of the students and the effects on the teachers? What was really obscene?

Although there are "dirty" words in Slaughterhouse Five, they are often in a humorous context. I think that understanding the humor in Slaughterhouse Five is necessary, and this understanding may require maturity, an attuning to army humor. For example: Billy and three lost American soldiers, Roland Weary, the mathematician caricature, and two scouts, isolated after the German breakthrough in the Ardennes, are fired on by a German sniper. Three shots are fired. All miss. After the third bullet Billy stands politely waiting for the sniper to have another chance, demonstrating his own understanding of the rules of warfare. However, the fourth bullet also misses, tumbling past his kneecap end over end. The other three Americans watch, safe in the ditch. Weary growls at Billy, "Get out of the road you dumb mother-fucker." (Vonnegut, p. 34) The humor here involves a picture of the mysterious sniper. Snipers were usually excellent marksmen, yet this marksman has failed to hit a single stationary target (described as a "filthy Flamango"). Even the sniper's bullet is comic: The war is almost over, German industry is in chaos, and the bullet doesn't have enough powder to go straight. The use of the four letter word is important here. It reveals the funny frustration of the real soldiers with this "preposterous" companion. The four letter word also performs a very important service for Billy. It saves his life. The word was "fresh and astonishing to Billy, who had never fucked anybody—and it did its job." He took cover. Despite some potential problems with language, the average English class that reads the book will identify with and find humor in Billy's lack of sexual experience and his initial shock and fascination at encountering new proflanity.

Our old friend, the four letter word, appears again in a humorous vein later in the book. The American prisoners have been brought to the German POW camp. They are guests of the English officers captured early in the war. The English put on a play, Cinderella, for the Americans. As the clock strikes midnight in the play Cinderella says: "Goodness me the clock has struck / Alackaday, and fuck my luck." (Vonnegut, p. 98) Billy laughs so hard he becomes hysterical and is hospitalized. The scene describes these soldiers well, and the jingle seems appropriately "English," particularly in the context of their lengthy stay in the POW camp. The only danger I can see here is if students start quoting the jingle around school or at home.

The English teacher need not refer directly to any of the profanity, or even quote it. After all, it is the incident that is funny and the profanity

16 Newlund, p. 21.
is within the context of the incident. Questions: "Do you think the incident of Billy and the sniper is funny? Why or why not?" Or, less directly, after the students have read either all or part of the book: "Have you encountered any funny incidents in the book? Which ones?" In retelling stories for the class, high school kids rarely include the profanity. If they do, they’ve chosen it and said it, not you. Again, going back to the Texas court’s definition of obscene material, these incidents are not obscene. They do not dehumanize, debase, or degrade Billy Pilgrim. He is already degraded and debased. A goal for the class is to determine what has debased and degraded him. Answering that question through writing and/or class discussion can put four letter words in their true context.

How to teach Slaughterhouse Five? One approach involves emphasizing the nature of tragedy, with students reading several novels in small groups. All of the students in the class read one modern novel of their choice. (I would suggest offering three choices, including Slaughterhouse Five, and perhaps four to six groups of students in each class with three to five members to each group.) A group chooses a novel to read and investigates the nature of tragedy, using its novel as a common experience. Each group’s project or written work compares, say, an ancient tragedy with the modern novel’s focus—in Slaughterhouse Five the slaughter of innocents by winged knights. Thus, Slaughterhouse Five will be studied directly by some of the class and indirectly by others. If the teacher has discussed its story before the choices are made and warned students of its language no major problems will occur. Based on the fact that only five kids out of thirty refused to support Mr. Severy in Drake, I imagine only one or two groups doing other novels. Although Slaughterhouse Five will not be read by everyone it will be known to everyone, and at least one important idea in the book will be discussed: "Was the bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, a modern-day tragedy? Why or why not?"

Students reporting on Slaughterhouse Five will be able to point out tragedies within the book itself: the execution of poor old Edgar Derby, the American POW and former high school teacher, for pilfering some china after the bombing; the plane crash of the optometrists; the piles of used and bullet-riddled clothing that the American POW’s don; the opalescent, ghostly soap and candles given the English POW’s (it is made from the human fat of dead Jews, gypsies, communists, and other “enemies of the state”); the tragedy of Billy’s life, lived successfully in the American dream.

Slaughterhouse Five can also be produced rather than taught. Transparencies and sound can be used to create a mood that reflects the historical period and the themes within the novel itself. The entire class can encounter the novel using this approach, but small groups of students within the class can produce either their impression of the total novel or their impression of portions of it. Doing the entire novel, students can create theme or characters. Adding the dimension of the olfactory sense one can bring the setting to life: the forest of the Ardennes, the POW camp, life in post war USA, the alien smells and sound of Tralfamadore. Each group will be forced to confront the novel before it is able to produce it.

My experience has been that high school students have better “trouble-antennae” than I do. They tend to consult me when they have encountered words they believed might prove offensive to “the administration.” I usually answer their doubt by saying, “How do you feel about the word (or scene)?” and/or “Do you think that character really spoke that way?” If they still feel uneasy, I say that it is okay with me if they use the words or scenes in question. Often, I feel uneasy myself, but am unable to determine if it is because my own education has been subject to so much censorship that anything free in the school context automatically makes me uneasy, or whether the words or scenes really are objectionable. A rule I have used is, when in doubt be liberal. It seems to work with kids, but not so well with fellow teachers.

The production of puppet and marionette shows is another way to approach a problem novel. I’ve used this method in grades eight through eleven. The plays Oh Dad Poor Dad, Mom’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feelin’ So Bad and one based on Arthur Laurent’s Home of the Brave were potentially the most troublesome. After my eleventh graders produced the latter, the music teacher whom we had invited accused my puppets of being blasphemous. The former, done by tenth graders just for our class, was quite well done, and although it astounded me with its freedom of dialogue, it produced no ripples.

I also want to suggest 8mm films made on the book, either by small groups which select a theme and develop it, or with the entire class doing the production. A variation on this is the color slide show accompanied by taped sound. Although my tenth graders did several films criticizing certain aspects of the American way of
life, they chose violence and the assassination of our leaders, no problem ever occurred. However, in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1970 there was an attempt to censor twelve slide/tape programs. The subjects were on a variety of topics ranging from poverty and affluence to patriotism and anti-war feelings. Contemporary music was used. A letter to the editor of the Flagstaff paper accused the schools of "brainwashing children with 'gross negativity from week to week.'"

Still photography can be used to illustrate the novel. Costumes can be made or rented, and students can take turns being Billy Pilgrim, Wild Bob or the photographer. (The love scene on Tralfamadore might present problems.) To produce a book, the students can develop and process their own films and make enlargements, providing each enlargement can be given a caption.

Does Slaughterhouse Five attack the American way of life? Is it anti-American? How can you teach it if it is? Slaughterhouse Five does attack some of the myths about the American way: (1) War is romantic and untrained civilian soldiers can win it (though Stephen Crane and Eric Maria Remarque helped destroy war's romance much earlier than Vonnegut); (2) American soldiers always win and the enemy always loses; (3) Americans are noble figures, good men, while the enemies are ignoble bad men; (4) good always wins over bad because, as the cartoonist Al Capp's character Mammy Yokum says, "It's better"; (5) Americans never do evil things; (6) Americans are never cowardly, always brave; (7) the American way of life based on material successes guarantees happiness; and (8) war waged by Americans is a morally righteous crusade to rid the world of something (in Dresden, of 135,000 innocent men, women, young people and children).

First, let's assume that the "myths" are true pictures of American life. If they are, attacking them can do no harm. However, censoring the attacker can do a great deal of harm to the attacker and to America or any society, particularly a democratic one. In his essay On Liberty, John Stewart Mill wrote, "Judgment is given to men that they may use it. Because it may be used erroneously, are men to be told that they ought not to use it at all?" Mill says that the greatest harm done by censorship is not to the heretics. Whenever a ban is placed on inquiry that does lead to orthodox conclusions "the greatest harm is done to those . . . whose whole mental development is cramped and their reason cowed by fear of the heresy." (p. 41) When that heretic is a teacher, then that crippling of reason is passed on to all of the students who are to govern society in the next generation.

If the myths of American life that Slaughterhouse Five attacks are indeed myths, then they deserve to vanish. Let's look at some in Slaughterhouse Five. First, in order to provide a balanced view, it might be advisable for the teacher to present a broad picture of the American life through films and good speakers, possibly even some who were in Europe during the war. Further, a danger in working with adolescents is that they sometimes see issues as black or white, not in nuances. In teaching Slaughterhouse Five, I would not deal with all of the myths I've mentioned, perhaps only one or two.

For instance, we fancy that Americans never do evil things, thus war waged by Americans is morally good, a crusade to rid the world of something. After Vietnam, few students believe we are all good. (Amazingly, in Vietnam some of our soldiers did what we believed only German soldiers did to patriots in W. W. II.) What did we do to Dresden? What did we do to our relatives, our city (for Dresden is Billy's ancestral home)? Dresden as Vonnegut describes it:

"The planes were always bound for somewhere else--Leipzig, Chemnitz, Plauen, places like that. So it goes.

Steam radiators still whistled cheerily in Dresden. Streetcars clanged, telephones rang and were answered.

Lights went on and off when switches were clicked.

There were theaters and restaurants. There was a zoo.

The principal enterprises of the city were medicine and food-processing and the making of cigarettes. (p. 149)

In fourteen hours on February 13, 1945, American and British bombers killed 135,000 Dresden men, women, and children. Most died in fire storms or of asphyxiation after the fire fighting ability of the city had been paralyzed.

Why? Well, students may answer that the Germans bombed London. (Incidentally teachers know that high school students who are accused of doing something wrong often say someone else did it also to justify their own acts and avoid punishment.) According to David Irving in The Destruction of Dresden, the London blitz,

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which lasted one year, resulted in thirteen thousand deaths. By contrast three days of allied bombing of Hamburg left forty-three thousand dead. The total deaths by the German air bombing of England was fifty thousand. Dresden was an undefended city. It was generally believed by its inhabitants that the city would not be attacked. Because of the Russian advance, it was crowded with eastern refugees. Students may say that Coventry and Rotterdam were also open cities. In May, 1940, German bombers killed one thousand civilians in Rotterdam; in Coventry, 380 civilians. What of bomb tonnage? Ninety-four tons were dropped on Rotterdam, nineteen tons on London. Three raids struck Dresden in fourteen hours. In the second raid, 650,000 incendiary bombs were scattered over the city. I haven't been able to determine exact tonnage. However, one bomber carried four tons of explosives. Multiply that by 1400 planes in one run. There were three runs. The statistics I've given are from Irving's book. Vonnegut uses them too.

Billy Pilgrim travels in time. A wealthy optometrist after World War II, Billy is the only survivor of a plane crash into Sugarbush Mountain. Rescued by golliwogs, he lies unconscious in a Vermont hospital. With him in the hospital is a Harvard history professor, Bertram Cope-land Rumfoord, age seventy, recovering from a skiing accident. Lily, his fifth wife, whom he has rescued from a go-go bar (She is a high school dropout with an IQ of 103.) brings him books he needs to write his one volume history of the U. S. Army Air Corps in the war. Rumfoord: "Americans have finally heard about Dresden, 23 years after the raid . . . So I've got to put something in my book. From the official Air Force standpoint, it'll all be new." Lily: "Why would they keep it a secret so long?" Rumfoord: "For fear that a lot of bleeding hearts might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do." (p. 191) Later: "'It had to be done,' Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden. 'I know,' said Billy, 'That's war. I know, I'm not complaining' . . . 'Pity the poor men who had to do it, [Rumfoord says].'" (p. 198) Debates and writing assignments can go from the tragedy of Dresden to general themes. Lily asks, "Why did they keep it a secret so long?" One may ask who is "they." Why do governments keep secrets? Does your family have secrets? Why?

What worries me is that many kids may not even be shocked by Dresden. I recently sat through a film study class in a New Jersey high school English class. The film was of a Nazi death camp in France. None of the students seemed shocked as hundreds of naked corpses were bulldozed into mass graves. I was shocked both by the film and the students' apparent indifference. I asked the teacher if he planned to use discussions and questions to show that their indifference was like the seed that led to the massacres, that it might happen here. He said he hadn't thought of that. It was a good idea but the bell was about to ring. It did. So it goes. The teacher's job in teaching Slaughterhouse Five to some classes may be to sensitize them.

Debate: Americans love Europeans and hate Asiatics. Proof? We never used the atom bomb on Germany. Response: 71,000 Japanese were killed in Hiroshima, 135,000 Germans were killed in Dresden. One result of talking of Dresden, writing of Dresden, may be that there'll be no more Dresdens. It would be interesting to have German and American parents and guests who had experiences in the air war come to class and talk. With German industry settling in America, with many American veterans of World War II still alive, the picture of man as man with a potential for good or evil could be confronted. It will be harder to find a Billy Pilgrim.

The American soldier is noble, the enemy is ignoble. Perhaps the myth ties in with criticism of the American way of life. I remember being in the army after the Korean War. Many of our prisoners had turned against their comrades; some had lain down and died of no apparent causes. A Code of Conduct was established, and we all had to attend lectures on what we would do if captured. Escape was one recommendation. We were not to lie down and die, ever. I don't know if the American POW in Slaughterhouse Five is really a World War II soldier. I would guess he is, since Vonnegut was a POW. I would guess further that we were more honest in 1954 than we were in 1944.

American soldiers do not come off well in Slaughterhouse Five. Billy Pilgrim, the hero, is a chaplain's assistant. He plays on a portable organ made by a vacuum cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey. Before he is captured he is described: six feet, three inches tall with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He has no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. He wears civilian shoes. Since one heel is missing he limps. (Every American knows that a man with a missing heel is a traitor.) As Professor Rumfoord says later, "I could carve a better man out of a banana." (p. 194) One of Billy's companions, Roland Weary, is a caricature. Eighteen years old, he is from Pittsburgh, unpopular in school because he was fat, stupid and mean. His father, a plumber, collected guns,
swords and torture instruments. (He once gave his wife a Spanish thumbscrew in working condition for Christmas.) Roland carries a trench knife his father gave him. It has brass knuckles on the grip and the knuckles have spikes. He is a walking catalogue of extra-military equipment including a bullet-proof Bible and the earliest porno-photography of a French woman and a donkey. The pictures of the Americans never change. We and the Germans see them as they are, usually caricatures of Western man as he is and as he will be. (After all we won the war and hamburgers are sold in Paris.) By contrast, we see the Germans as supermen briefly, the caricature, then they snap into focus and are as they are, human beings as we were. The teacher of English will have to read the novel and try to make his students see beyond the surface, to see the tricks of the writer, Kurt Vonnegut.

The Germans captured Billy and Weary because Weary is busily beating up his companion. "Five German soldiers and a police dog on a leash were looking down into the bed of the creek." (p. 52) We have heard the dogs' frightening bark earlier. However, as the lens is focused, the dog is not frightening at all, and neither are the soldiers. The dog is a female German Shepherd borrowed from a farmer. Her tail is between her legs. She is cold. Two of the Germans are boys in their early teens. Two are ramshackle old men, droolers as toothless as donkey. The pictures of the Americans never change. We and the Germans see them as supermen briefly, the caricature, then they snap into focus and are as they are, human beings as we were. The teacher of English will have to read the novel and try to make his students see beyond the surface, to see the tricks of the writer, Kurt Vonnegut.

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I don't understand the furor about obscenity, sex and blasphemy in Slaughterhouse Five. Much more is criticized about our way of life. If Slaughterhouse Five was published in China, a Maoist would zero in immediately on the anti-patriotic slant. The Italian Fascists banned Mickey Mouse in 1939 for a similar reason. A real horror for me is the realization that our educational system, after all these years of public schooling, has failed to make our adults perceptive enough to see a real danger.

So the English teacher's job is to point out through Socratic dialogue: (1) what seems to be said in the book (what the censors attack), and (2) what is really said in the book (what censors would attack if they had any brains). The good, the real soldiers die. The bad, the incompetent seem to win and become rich after the war. After the war Billy becomes as rich as Croesus. He makes $60,000 a year as an optometrist. His money is made on the frames. But for a Pilgrim who sees, the zoo on Tralfamadore is a refuge.

In the Ardennes, German combat photographers photograph the make-believe capture of Billy. Billy sees his grown-up, critical daughter, Barbara, realistically as a pretty girl with legs like "an Edwardian grand piano." (p. 29) Myriads of Tralfamadoreians watch Billy and Montana Wildhack in their transparent domed zoo. Both are naked. Sometimes a navy blue canopy is dropped to simulate Earth night. The skiers who find the plane crash site on Sugarbush mountain are dressed in black windmasks with eye holes. They look like golliwogs. The German guards who emerge from Slaughterhouse Five after the fourteen hours see a moonscape. Only minerals are left. The sun is an angry little pinhead: "They drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing though their mouths were often open. They looked like a barber shop quartet in a silent movie." (p. 178) A movie where seeing is the sense we use. See, Vonnegut tells us. Take a look. Often what you see, the golliwog, isn't a golliwog at all. This is what the English teacher must do. Make his students see.


Like many books called anti-religious, Slaughterhouse Five tends to have religious references. Often when it is irreligious and obscene it is when we see ourselves in the mirror that Vonnegut holds up to us. It is ourselves that Judge Moore sees.

Using metaphors, the English teacher and his class can confront the issue that Slaughterhouse Five is considered irreligious by some. Consider angels, Adam and Eve, Eden, rebirth, heaven, haloes on saints, Christ. The German soldier who captures Billy has "... the face of a blond angel, fifteen years old." He was "as beautiful as Eve." (p. 53) After his capture, Billy sees haloes around the heads of his companions and captors: "It is St. Elmo's fire, a sort of electronic radiation..." (p. 63) The movie film about World War II that Billy sees backwards as he becomes unstuck in time has bombs fly back into bomb bays and Hitler turn into a baby. "All humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve..." (p. 75) Even God is not secure from
His own laws against murder. Billy reads from a Gideon Bible about Sodom and Gomorrah: “Those were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them.” (p. 21) Lot’s wife is turned to a pillar of salt for being a witness to God’s crime. Billy looks back too, at our crime at Dresden. Montana Wildhack, the porno starlet, also captured by the Tralfamadarians, wears a prayer on a locket between her naked breasts in Tralfamadore where she and Billy, like Adam and Eve, begin again. The German guard’s railroad car in the prisoners’ train, where the prisoners lie in each other’s excrement, is “. . . like heaven. There was candlelight and there were bunks with quilts and blankets heaped on them. There was a cannonball stove with a steaming coffeepot on top. There was a table with a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread and a sausage on it. There were four bowls of soup.” (p. 68) We all know what a pilgrim (Billy’s last name) is, but there are also references to Billy as Christ. He is born and later captured by the flying saucer on Christmas Eve. In America, where Billy is successful, he weeps every so often for no apparent reason. Remember Gethsemane? Our modern cure for seeing? The doctor who knew of the crying, “an extremely quiet thing . . . and not very moist,” tells him to take a nap every day and use the Magic Fingers vibrator bolted to his mattress. (p. 61)

A perceptive class will begin to see, unlike some adults who seem quite blind and allergic to salt. However, it will take work and time by the English teacher. Discussions of what is blasphemy, what is religion, of John Stewart Mill’s comments on heresy and orthodoxy would be good. I would not limit these discussions to honors classes either. With translation and simpler language, the slower student (intelligence and virtue are not equated) has the right to be confronted with important issues. This is part of the teacher’s job as Mr. Pilgrim.

In closing, I would like to quote a teacher who was censored. The teacher was Socrates.

For if you think that you restrain men from reproaching you for your evil lives by putting them to death, you are very much mistaken. That way of escape is hardly possible, and it is not a good one. It is much better, and much easier, not to silence reproaches, but to make yourselves as perfect as you can. This is my parting prophecy to you who have condemned me.21


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BIBLIOGRAPHY


