Comparative Essay Essay, Research Paper

Comparative Essay

In the books, Slaughter House 5 by Kurt Vonnegut and Catch 22 by Joseph Heller there are many themes that at first don?t appear to be related but once given a closer look have striking similarities. Both books are about one mans experience through World War II, one being a fighter pilot and another being a soldier. Each man is known as an anti-war hero. They do not agree with the war and do not find it appropriate to fight for it. Neither of the two men was the average ?John Wayne? war hero that fights and dies for his country. This is what makes these two books stand out from other war books. Both of these books also were used during the Vietnam War as anti-war books denouncing the war.

One major theme that comes up in both of these books is the theme of no free will. In Slaughterhouse 5 Vonnegut proclaims through the narrator that there is no such thing as free will and that all things in life are predestined. That no matter what we chose to do we really aren?t choosing to do it at all and that the choice was already made. In Catch 22 the theme is the same just brought to our attention in a different way. Catch 22 is a paradox, leaving no way of escaping from a dilemma. No matter what we do or say we can?t escape it thus leaving us with no free will. Catch 22 is best described in the book when Yossarian states, You don?t have to fly anymore missions if you?re crazy, but you have to ask first and if you ask than you?re not crazy because anyone that wants to get out of combat is not crazy (Heller 46). The utter simplicity of this ?catch? at one-point makes Yossarian let out a whistle. So in essence both of these characters are plagued with the fact that they have no free will. Billy Pilgrim because everything in life is predestined so he has no say in what goes on and Yossarian because he has to keep flying more missions because of Catch 22.

Another major theme that comes across in these books is the anti-war hero. Both main characters are the exact opposite of what we would consider war heroes. Yossarian has no intention of laying down his life for his country and thinks anyone that would is utterly stupid. He many times in the book tries to get out of flying more missions by admitting himself to the hospital although he is not sick and asking the Doctor to tell his commanding officer he is not suitable for combat. Then there is Billy Pilgrim. Billy is a mild-mannered man who would much rather cruise through life turning the other cheek than having a confrontation. He is a tall lanky, goofy character that when captured behind enemy lines didn?t have a helmet, boots or a weapon. He looked so ridiculous that a German photographer took a picture of him to show the Germans how ill prepared the Americans were for war. When Billy enters the POW camp he is portrayed even more as a fool when instead of being given a normal overcoat like the rest of the prisoners he is given a woman?s fur coat. These are not at all what I would consider a war hero and that is exactly what the authors were trying to do. They were trying to question many things about war. One was to question our assumptions not only to the right to wage war but also the people who fight in the war and the leaders that run the war. The authors writing about the characters in this way also paints us a picture that is not often painted. This picture shows that all soldiers aren?t the rugged, handsome, brave and strong men that we all believe but that many soldiers are people like you and me. Most of them kids, that would just be starting college if it weren?t for war. Many of them scared, helpless, and confused as to why they are fighting and killing. These authors question war and its many aspects instead of advertise it.

A theme that is a little more hidden in each of these books is what war does to people. In Catch 22 Yossarian is hysterical when he yells at McWatt to take evasive action from German anti-aircraft flak. When Mcwatt doesn?t do what Yossarian tells him Yossarian grabs him by the throat and starts to choke him. This is his friend, his comrade that he actually thinks about killing but doesn?t because he is the pilot of the plane. The stress that these men go through is not just physical but also very mental. They know that the very next mission they fly could very well be their last and this makes them always depressed and bitter. Yossarian once makes a comment about the new pilots that have just arrived saying, ?And it?s not there fault that they were courageous, confident and carefree. He would just have to be patient with them until one of them was killed and the rest wounded, and then they would all turn out okay (Heller 343).? This is a very sick way of thinking but for the most part it was true. The new pilots were thought of as inexperienced and naive and this is why they were courageous, confident and carefree. Yossarian knew that it was only a matter of time before they too realized the horrors of war and would end up like the rest of them, cold, bitter and lonely. In Slaughterhouse 5 it is much of the same. When Billy is captured they are loaded onto boxcars and stay there for two days. While they are there they excrete into steel helmets that they empty out through ventilators. People die right in front of the men and just lay there with the other men like there sleeping and they will awake anytime. This physical torture that these men go through eventually leads to mental struggles. While some prisoners are putting on a play called Cinderella Billy is watching and can?t help himself from laughing hysterically. Then all of a sudden he uncontrollably he starts shrieking. He keeps shrieking till he is taken to the hospital and tied down. The struggles that these men go through much of the time are just too much for the men to handle. Billy was watching Cinderella and suddenly is reminded of something that makes him uncontrollably shriek. War is so tough on a person mentally and physically that sometimes some men just can?t deal with it. I know this because my Grandpa was a pilot in World War II. He lost many friends over there and when he came back he was a completely different person. Every time he hears the national anthem he can?t hold himself back from tears because it signifies so much that he and so many other men sacrificed for their country.

Slaughterhouse 5 and Catch 22 are two books that were written to show the ridiculousness of war. They were written to share with everybody that sometimes it isn?t the soldier who kills the most enemy or the pilot who bombs the most targets that are the heroes of the war but it is those people that stand up and proclaim the utter stupidity of war. The heroes are those who stand up for what they believe is right even if that means disobeying an order. These books were written most of all to share with us that war is wrong and is a waste of valuable lives. They convinced us that all free will and sanity is lost in war and that it can destroy men not just physically but also mentally. I think Heller put it best when he described what Yossarian was going through when his friend was dying in his arms,

?Yossarian was cold, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entails. Man was matter, that was Snowden?s secret. Drop him out a window and he will fall. Set fire to him and he will burn. Bury him and he will rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage (Heller 430).?

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