

IB Lang & Lit

Written Task 1

Rationale: 294 words

Written Task: 1000 words

Rationale

This written task is an exploration of the characters and themes present in Chapter Five of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five*.

The type of text chosen was a narrative which consists of mostly dialogue and an occasional third person omniscient narrator. Although written with Vonnegut's ideas, the style and language are not replicated as Vonnegut's. Instead, Vonnegut's themes are accessed differently than seen in *Slaughterhouse Five*---through confused and inquiring Tralfamadorian children, explanatory zoo guides, and mothers of Tralfamadore.

The target audience is people who have already read Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (or else the many references throughout the written task will not make sense), but more specifically, readers who are contemplative of human ontology and nature. The desired reaction from the audience is fearful realization, a result of the purpose.

In general, the purpose of this written task is to extend Vonnegut's cruel ideas on human existence. It seeks to explore human nature as seen by an alien population, Tralfamadorians, who are referenced throughout *Slaughterhouse Five*. It distinguishes between humans, who are flawed and limited, to Tralfamadorians, who are more advanced in time, philosophy, and many other concepts. The written task critiques the same phenomena seen in the novel, namely, automation, pointlessness, religion, and human nature (with examples of time, sadness, and asking "why").

The themes of this novel, which are extended in the written task, demonstrate how language and meaning are shaped by culture and context. The context behind *Slaughterhouse Five* is Vonnegut's devastating experience as a prisoner of war in World War 2, witnessing events as horrible as the bombing of Dresden. This caused Vonnegut to come to a realization about human nature and reality, a realization he slowly reveals with his use of Tralfamadorians to display themes and messages in *Slaughterhouse Five*.

“Look!” the Tralfamadorian kid telecommunicated to his mother while opening and closing his green little alien hands rapidly. The mother scanned the telegram located on the front of the geodesic dome; it gave the species and where it was from.

“It is like those Earthlings who inhabit earth, but has wings and fur.”

The word Earthling immediately grabbed the Tralfamadorian kid’s attention. He looked ahead in the current exhibit, but saw nothing interesting occur in the past, present, or future. “I want to see the great explainers!” said the kid.

The Tralfamadorians kept on through their exciting day at the zoo and found the most popular exhibit there, *The Earthlings of Planet Earth*.

Squeezing their way to the front, the mother and the kid pressed a red button, which would enable the informational telegram. “Their time was beautiful,” the mother communicated to her kid.

The kid wanted to see what was so “great” about this species, so he brought his hands closer to the dome’s surface. Seeing the past, present, and future, the Tralfamadorian focused on the present.

“What is that?” the kid asked.

“A book,” the mother replied.

“What’s in it?”

“For us, it is like drawings strung together which form some sort of message for the Earthling. For him, it has his answers. The one he is reading now is called The New Testament. It tells him stories, teaches him lessons, and gives him religion.”

The boy laughed at the thought of something so absurd.

“Now,” the mother said, “it may seem foolish to you, but to them it means a great deal. All their lives, they ask the forbidden question, *why?* Unlike us, they cannot see that there is no why, that things simply *are*, like bugs encased in amber. Has your father not told you this?”

“I don’t understand,” the kid communicated.

“It is hard to understand,” the mother said, looking at the Earthling reading his book, “there is something in him, in a fifth dimension even we cannot see, that believes he is living for a reason. That he has a purpose. This little book helps him find that purpose.”

“Ooooooooh” the crowd of Tralfamadorians telepathically resonated as Billy flipped a page in his book.

“Aaaaaaah” they said as he put the book down and picked up his own journal.

“What’s he doing now?” the kid asked his mother.

“They call it literature,” she replied. “See, since Earthlings cannot communicate in the way we can, telepathy, their only way to save messages is to write them down.”

The Tralfamadorian kid opened and closed his hands quickly when he saw the Earthling begin to write. “What is he writing,” the kid asked.

“Let’s ask the guide,” the mother said back.

The zoo guide communicated to both of them that he was writing a story about a man named Yon Yonson, who lived in Wisconsin.

“What does that mean?” wondered the Tralfamadorian.

“Well...” said the mother, “look at the Earthling’s actions. What do you see?”

The kid opened his hands wide to get a clear view of the Earthling. “He is walking around, then using the restroom, then fixing his teeth, then eating food, then washing the dishes, then exercising, then taking a shower, then shaving his face and trimming his toenails.”

“What do you see after 62 hours?” the mother asked.

“Walking around... using the restroom... brushing his teeth... eating, washing, exercising, shaving... it’s the same stuff!”

“And months after that?”

“It’s the same!”

“Things are always like this,” the mother answered, “Automation. That is how things are, and how they will always be. The Earthling cannot grasp this concept and attempts to answer it in pointless ways, asking questions such as *why* and spending their entire lives searching for its answer.”

“Pointlessness,” the mother continued, “surrounds the Earthlings. They just don’t realize it.”

After a pause, the mother and the boy tuned in to the zoo guide’s telepathic messages, explaining Billy’s actions and nature.

“All around the dome,” the zoo guide communicated, “you see signs of the Earthling’s culture. On the television tube, there is a picture of one American cowboy killing another. There on the refrigerator, you see a Gay Nineties couple on a bicycle. The Tralfamadorian designer of this exhibit is showing here the obsession with *other-ism* that all Earthlings have, to separate themselves from those who are not like them.”

“Additionally, Earthlings sense an emotion known as sadness. Their view of time---represented in a linear, orderly fashion---constitutes a major reason for this. Trapped in the present, sadness is a natural reaction to loss in the Earthling’s nature. When something is finally gone, they believe its existence has disappeared and grieve. They do not see that all things, including lives, are lost when they are always to be lost, yet they are still living in the many other dimensions of time.”

The Tralfamadorian kid stopped receiving messages from the zoo guide. He went up to the dome’s surface as close as he could and looked down on the Earthling.

“Earthling” he telepathically sent to Billy.

The Tralfamadorian jumped up and down, waving his plunger head, trying to get the Earthling’s attention.

Surprisingly, the Earthling looked into the crowd of Tralfamadorians for once. He lifted his eyes from The New Testament to see the Tralfamadorian kid jumping up and down, wondering what he was doing.

When the two made eye contact, the Tralfamadorian wanted to help the Earthling. He sent a simple telegram, hoping the Earthling would listen and share them with his planet.

It read, “Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones.”

When the Earthling did not react, the Tralfamadorian kid tried again.

“Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones.”

After tilting and scratching his head, the Earthling lowered his eyes back to The New Testament.

The Tralfamadorian had forgotten he had no power to change what things were, and what they would always be. That, in the end, the Earthling was never meant to understand.

Works Cited

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Childrens Crusade: a Duty Dance with Death*. Laurel, 1969.