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## Can We Really Make a Difference?

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Mrs. Cain

Literary Explorations II

1 March 2010

### Can We Really Make a Difference?

Over the course of history, which type of person makes a bigger impact, an active manipulator fighting to stay alive or a passive observer floating along in the sea of life?

Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, and Maus, by Art Spiegelman, answered this question differently. Billy Pilgrim, the main character of Slaughterhouse Five, was so passive and uncaring about his fate that he effectively came “unstuck” in time. Conversely, Vladek Spiegelman of Maus put up a fight at every opportunity and never willingly traveled along in life. However, neither character made a difference on the events of the Second World War. Based on examples from each novel, one could argue the case that no matter what people do, they are always condemned to a life of insignificance, making little or no impact on the world around them.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, millions of people were affected. Some enlisted in the military; others became victims of persecution and hatred. These stories focus on both circumstances and view the war from completely different perspectives.

Billy Pilgrim became a chaplain’s assistant at the start of World War II. In this position, “[h]e was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends... [he] expected no promotions or medals [and] bore no arms” (Vonnegut 80). One time, he was sent to replace another assistant that had been killed in action. Instead of finding the chaplain he was to assist, Billy ended up behind enemy lines with three companions. It was at this point that he became “unstuck” in

time. Billy no longer had to stay within one moment, but could move all around, visiting previous parts of his life, or seeing what the future held in store for him. He could even travel to different planets and visited the Tralfamadorians several times. These small aliens lived on the planet Tralfamadore and helped Billy to understand the concept of time. They taught him how all moments happen at the same time, not one after another. For example, the Tralfamadorians blew up the universe while testing new flying saucer fuel. When Billy questioned whether they could prevent it, they told him that the pilot “has *always* pressed it [the button igniting the fuel], and he always *will*. We have *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way” (117). This single phrase summarized the Tralfamadorian viewpoint on time. They also told him to just “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (171). These two statements express the passivity of Billy Pilgrim and the novel itself.

After the war, Billy returned to America where he lived a quiet, uneventful life until his death. He never had any sort of lasting effect on even his neighbors, let alone on the world around him.

Vladek Spiegelman took a very different approach to the war and survival. As a Jew living in Poland, he was in danger of persecution and death by the Nazis. He constantly looked for new ways to make money to improve the lives of his family members. Through black market deals, bribes, and hideouts, Vlad managed to provide for his family and keep them safe at the start of the war. When Vladek was kept as a prisoner of war in Poland, the Germans attempted to kill him to make space for more prisoners. In order to escape, he had to bribe German soldiers to release him into the homes of local Jews (Spiegelman 62).

To make money in the early stages of the war, Vladek smuggled cloth to tailors in return for small payments (77) and traded sugar to grocery stores (85). However, he had to live in fear

of arrest and death at every moment of the day. Germans who caught smugglers and thieves did not treat them kindly (83). When the war got worse and all the Jews were shipped to concentration camps, Vlad was forced into hiding multiple times to avoid a worse camp, or even death (110).

Even by fighting every minute of every day for his life, Vladek was only able to save himself. He never saw his son after the war, his parents died in a camp, and his wife committed suicide shortly thereafter. He survived the war, living as a cranky old man in an unhappy marriage with only his other son to listen to his story.

Despite their best efforts, Vladek Spiegelman and Billy Pilgrim did not make any large, lasting marks on their worlds. Whether they remain passive and uncaring or determined and resistant, nothing they did made a change. Both characters went on to live lives of obscurity and regret, living a day at a time. Through the experiences of their characters, both authors give voice to the belief that “Everything is inevitable, nothing is controllable,” or, as Kurt Vonnegut would say, “So it goes.”

Works Cited

Vonnegut, Kurt. Slaughterhouse Five. New York: Dell Publishing, 1991.

Spiegelman, Art. Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History. New York: Pantheon,  
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