

The First Person's Futile Search for Meaning in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

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Abstract

*War is destructive in the full sense of the word. It starts the same way it ends. Trying to find a justification for it is tiring and absurd. One should first try to understand what the word war means in order to find an answer. Or one has to distinguish between the concept of war and a just war. Is war just by any means? According to the BBC Ethics Guide, there are six conditions for war to be considered just. Two of them are related to the fact that war must be waged for a just cause and another is related to the intention behind the war which must be good. It goes on by indicating that innocent people in war should not be harmed (BBC Ethics Guide). As a reader of these conditions, man's bewilderment increases and reaches the limits of insanity. How can the intention behind a war be good? Theoretically speaking, these conditions are lawful but in reality they are futile and meaningless. Therefore this study aims at proving the futility of war through the depiction of Billy Pilgrim's trauma in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.*

Key words: Futile, trauma, war, destructive, depiction, reality.

Along history and through the passage of time, people witness war in different areas all over the world, and wars are waged just for secular conveniences and for the pursuit of power. The consequences of such wars are devastating for the nations in terms of financial issues, human resources and infrastructure. Above all, many people are victimized by war because they are sometimes dragged to it unwillingly and without a good reason. Here in lies the futility of war and that is why we can't classify war as being just. In this respect, Vonnegut expresses his failure to write his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* right from the very first chapter saying "[t]his one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt" (28). Accordingly, as Maria Beville puts it, "[h]e felt that he failed because he was himself unable to describe; to recreate in language the true terror of the experience" (48). Vonnegut chooses to depict the life of Billy Pilgrim instead, taking into consideration that dealing with the lives of those who underwent the experience of war is much more important than war itself.

What adds to Vonnegut's conception of the futility of war is that he has ended its story right from the very beginning as if he is moving in a closed circle that starts the same way it ends; he starts with the story of Billy pilgrim which turns out to be a story within another story that tells us about the experience of a person in the Dresden bombing. Therefore, Vonnegut has limited the story at the end of the first chapter by a starting point and an ending saying:

It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet? (28)

Wayne D. McGinnis has referred to Vonnegut's style in writing describing it with circularity; McGinnis indicates that when Vonnegut decided to talk about his Dresden experience, he has indulged in his own imagination away from any framing structure and moved in a circular structure (57). McGinnis goes further by highlighting evidences of the circularity nature of the novel through the citation of a particular song in the first chapter of the novel:

My name is Yon Yonson,

I work in Wisconsin, 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. (3-4)

The reader feels with Vonnegut and believes that by his delineation of Billy Pilgrim's life through war, Vonnegut is trying to find catharsis for his own emotions. Consequently, Kristen Leatherwood notes that "writing provides undeniable catharsis at least temporarily, and yet actually verbalizing experience can prove challenging and many times undesirable for the trauma victim" (20). This means that through writing, Vonnegut tries to reflect the victimized articulation of the experience through war which caused his trauma. The victimized is Billy Pilgrim. He is a senile who becomes "unstuck in time" (29) and who keeps oscillating in the past, present and future.

As regards to the reader, he/she finds no split between chapter one and two in the novel for in the first chapter the events are narrated by the first person method, i.e. Kurt Vonnegut himself, then Vonnegut allows one of his characters, Billy, to continue telling the story. Thus, Billy Pilgrim is a character who is allowed to speak Vonnegut's mind. And though Billy Pilgrim's narration of the story is fragmented, still the reader sympathizes with him and feels that he is reliable because he is an indirect Vonnegut. In this context, Kelly Lynn Thomas points out that "[t]he inclusion of the author as a character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* lends credibility to the narrative and the book's anti-war message" (1). Neither has the reader sensed a division between history and imagination. Actually, Ann Rigney implies that through the historical fiction nature of the novel, Vonnegut manages to reveal the past in a vivid way; she continues by noting that the experience of war with all of its intensity and impact on those who went through it has a role in establishing a connection between past actors and present readers (17).

The reader feels that Vonnegut in the first chapter of the novel is just gathering material and planning for writing his novel. He has listed two historical books that he read such as Mary Endell's *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery* and Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and The Madness of Crowds*. Moreover, he has read Theodore Roethke's *Words for the Wind* and Erika Ostrovsky's *Celine and His Vision* (26-27). But the reader finds that Vonnegut isn't satisfied enough with just referring back to historical material and rather he prefers to create an imaginative world of his own allowing Billy Pilgrim to start telling us his story. So, the novel becomes a combination of history and creative imagination; Rigney indicates that in the storytelling process the past which is related to the traumatic experience of the main character exists in the present and is fixed to remind the following generations of the bitterness of war (16). Consequently, Vonnegut reinforces this point through leaving Billy Pilgrim goes back and forth in time without any systematic ordering of the events.

Billy is presented by Vonnegut as being "spastic in time" (29). He is the son of a barber. He is funny looking and funny in his behaviors and reactions. Vonnegut's depiction of him is strange right from the very beginning and the reader discovers that there's something wrong with Billy. Billy is confused and his confusion is revealed to the reader when Vonnegut introduces him by saying:

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. (29)

As the narration goes on, Billy passes through different experiences that have contributed to form his personality and to be a reason for his trauma as well. When he was young, he got married to the daughter of the owner of the Ilium School of Optometry. Before his marriage, he was an ordinary man who served in the infantry in Europe and was taken a prisoner by the Germans. Events went on and the reader knows that Billy has become rich. In one flight with a group of optometrists to Montreal, the plane crashed; everyone was killed except Billy. Billy lives to tell us his own story talking on a radio program one night about being kidnapped by a flying saucer which went to Tralfamadore (30). Billy's dialogue with his daughter, Barbara, about Tralfamadore is really funny. When she asked him from where he created such a crazy name, he answered:

'That's what the creatures who live there *call* it.'

'Oh God,' said Barbara, and she turned her back on him. She celebrated frustration by clapping her hands. 'May I ask you a simple question?'

'Of course.'

'Why is it you never mentioned any of this before the airplane crash?'

'I didn't think time was *ripe*.' (38)

The reader becomes aware of Billy's attempt to escape reality with its linear order of timing preferring to live an imaginative world where he is free from structure.

McGinnis explains that "[t]he philosophy of Tralfamadore on time and death, as Billy explains it, is an escape from the concept of linear time, just as their novels are an escape from linear narration" (58). Moreover, the reader notices that the tone of narration is melancholic since it is about war and death and the narrator keeps saying "so it goes" whenever death is mentioned or whenever anything trivial happens. The narrator has mentioned this phrase when Billy's father died (30); at other points in the novel he says it when talking about Billy's survival from the plane crash (31). It has also been recurred in the middle of the novel when Rosewater shot a young soldier mistakenly believing that he is a German soldier (128). In Each time this phrase has been recurred, the reader feels that the narrator reaches certain moments where he is unable to speak more. This is part of Vonnegut's style in writing since this adds to the circular structure of the novel that reinforces the theme of the meaninglessness and futility of war. Therefore, the form in the novel and the narrative techniques used by Vonnegut provided an aid to clarify the content. McGinnis comments that the phrase "so it goes," is the Tralfamadorians way of ignoring death giving a cyclical quality of the novel (59).

Billy has been traumatized from the amount of killing that he witnessed throughout the war. "And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden" (128). His trauma reaches its climax when picturing the way in which Edgar Derby has been killed. Though Vonnegut has promised the reader to make the Edgar Derby's death incident at the climax of the novel, he places it at the very end because it is the most futile experience which Billy has witnessed. Vonnegut in his dialogue with his friend Bernard O'Hare says:

'I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby,' I said.

'The irony is *so* great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad.' (6)

In the above quote the verb 'think' expresses uncertainty on Vonnegut's part and that's why the reader discovers that Vonnegut mentioned the incident at the last page of the novel instead of the climax. The incident of Derby's trial and the act of his killing just for a silly reason, taking a teapot, in the middle of witnessing a great war and a great massacre is where irony reaches its utmost. It is an intentional step by Vonnegut to show the futility of war and how unjust it is because many people are victimized by it without any good reason. Edgar Derby's killing is a powerful example that shows the consequences that are brought up by war. At this incident, the reader stands speechless and he/she becomes convinced of Vonnegut's brilliant style in portraying the futility and ugliness of war. He dealt with this theme skillfully through the implementation of the circular narrative style, the use of irony and the creation of the imaginative world of Tralfamadore. All of these stylistic techniques served the content and helped Vonnegut convey the anti-war message. He then ends his story by closing the circle with the use of onomatopoeic sounds:

Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped. Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, "Poo-tee-weet?" (275)

It is as McGinnis puts it "[w]ith the faint echo of the cycle of nature, the green and coffin-shaped wagon, we realize that the cycle itself reflects man's own nature as he experiences the regeneration of immortality in his mind" (67).

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