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"Listen: Billy Pilgrim Has Come Unstuck in Time":

Billy Pilgrim's Binary Function as Vonnegut's Coping Mechanism and Anti-War Messenger

"'*Poo-tee-tweet?*'" This is the very last word Kurt Vonnegut leaves his readers with in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five.* He says it is always quiet after a massacre except for the birds because there is nothing else intelligent to say but "poo-tee-tweet?" However, after recognizing Vonnegut's brilliant rhetoric, it seems he leaves his readers with a resonating testimony with just this single word. Following its publication in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade: A Duty -Dance with Death* by Kurt Vonnegut was instantly established as one of the greatest anti-war books of all time and Vonnegut's shining masterpiece. Nearly twenty-four years after the event, he ingeniously weaves together autobiographical and science-fiction elements in this telling of his actual experience as a prisoner of war during World War Two and a witness of the Dresden fire-bombing. The novel takes on a sporadic, schizophrenic progression as it tells the tale of the helpless Billy Pilgrim and his time as an American prisoner of war while also including occasional intrusions by Vonnegut himself. Billy's story is presented to the reader in fragmented episodes because he has become "unstuck in time," reliving various moments in his life. In one such episode, Billy is abducted by creatures from an alien planet called Tralfamadore, where he is put on display in a Tralfamadorian zoo and taught about the true nature of time. According to the Tralfamadorians, time is not linear; everything that has ever happened and ever will happen is frozen in an eternal present and free will is essentially non-existent. Evaluating *Slaughterhouse-Five* through a literary analysis approach, I will examine how these fantasy

experiences reflect the limitations of language and the difficulties Vonnegut faced in recounting a traumatic wartime experience. Furthermore, I will consider Billy's role as a Brechtian character and how his time-travel adventures make him the means through which Vonnegut expresses his commentary on the moral corruption of war.

The year of the novel's publication, 1969, is perhaps partly responsible for its great success and influence. Printed at the height of the Vietnam war, when the U.S. death count exceeded 33,000, *Slaughterhouse-Five* spoke to the anti-war movement which peaked in 1968 when the Tet Offensive determined that the end of the war would not come any time soon. In December of 1969, the first U.S. draft lottery since WWII was initiated, creating much controversy and further increasing the nation's atmosphere of tension (Vietnam). Although he became a successful writer, Vonnegut began his college career as a biochemistry major at Cornell University and his background in the sciences is evident in his writing. He uses a scientific approach in his writing, asking a "what if" question then using fiction as an experiment to find the answer. According to literary scholar Thomas F. Marvin, Vonnegut creates "unlikely situations to see what they reveal about human nature" (5). These mind experiments challenge readers to think more deeply about the world around them and their place in it." Although the content of *Slaughterhouse-Five* centers around the time Vonnegut spent as a soldier in WWII after flunking out of Cornell, his humanist beliefs revealed by his fiction "science experiments" perfectly coincide with Vietnam war era, thus making him a prominent figure of the anti-war movement.

The novel begins with an introductory chapter in which Vonnegut informs the reader that the events in the story happened "more or less" and this book was a particularly challenging one for him to write. He confesses: "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in

money and anxiety and time" (Vonnegut 2). He believed writing about Dresden would be an easy task yet many times he found himself at a loss for words simply because "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre," thus the fictional character Billy Pilgrim was born for a dual purpose. He eases the torment of remembering the all too real destruction of buildings and bodies alike and his time-travel adventures create a new form with which to convey the horrors of war. In his article "Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five,*" Charles B. Harris argues that Vonnegut uses Billy as a way to "remove himself as much as possible from the scene he narrates, cushioning it with multiple perspectives" (232). This theory is evidenced by the novel's lack of depth when telling about the actual moment of Dresden's destruction. Billy never travels to the actual moment of the attack but rather, informs the reader of the event through an episode in which he recounts the event for his fellow earthling, Montana Wildhack, on the planet Tralfamadore. Thus, Vonnegut dissociates himself from the traumatic experience on two different levels, making it more bearable to summon the painful memories of the slaughtering of nearly 25,000 civilians by a hailstorm of incendiary bombs.

Regardless of the limitations Vonnegut faced when trying to put his story down on paper, he reflects on how big a temptation Dresden was to write about and compares it to a childish song which goes:

> 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. . ."

Like this rhyme that repeats infinitely, Vonnegut confesses that his memory of Dresden pervades his mind. Scholar Donald J. Greiner suggests that by mentioning this repetitive jingle, Vonnegut signals to the reader that "the primary accomplishment of Slaughterhouse-Five may indeed be personal" (43). The first of many biblical allusions is made in this first chapter as Vonnegut concludes that this novel was "written by a pillar of salt," referring to the story of Lot's wife who is turned into a pillar of salt when she looks back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Looking back is a very human thing to do and Billy is the instrument that makes this possible for Vonnegut. His admittance that the events in the book happened "more or less" implies that the purpose behind the novel is not merely to restate facts but rather, to extract some sort of moral value from the tragic event and in doing so, shed the weight of the of the memory and liberate himself from the Yon Yonson-like cycle of remembrance.

That is not to say, however, that Vonnegut wants to simply forget the horrifying events he endured. Perhaps he simply feels a sense of duty, a "moral and artistic responsibility to the events concerned" and needs to express his views after so many years, as scholar T.J. Matheson believes (230). The dangers of the manipulation of collective memory seems to be a concern to Vonnegut. He hints at this matter when he mentions a visit to the New York World's Fair where he sees "what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Company and Walt Disney" and also when he is informed of the top secret status of the details on the raid of Dresden to which he replies: "Secret? My God—from *whom*?" (Vonnegut 11). The theme of remembering the past is also reflected by the fact that according to the Tralfamadorian conception of time, Billy's past is never truly behind him and the reader is constantly being transported back to earlier moments in his life. Vonnegut too finds himself constantly looking back at a particular

memory. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the instrument with which Vonnegut finds worth within this haunting retrospection and creates a sense of closure.

The novel's sporadic piecing together of moments breaks away from traditional story-telling form and is yet another echo of Vonnegut's struggles with attempting to adequately convey an experience that seems to be beyond the capacity of language. As scholar William Rodney Allen points out, war is often such a "shock to those who experienced it that the only response they found adequate to describe it in literature was a searing irony" (80). Vonnegut's work does often contain irony but this alone is not enough. The atrocity is beyond the scope of normal logic and thus, Vonnegut utilizes science fiction as a mechanism for commenting on the reality of what he witnessed. Scholars suggest that Vonnegut uses this new form because he felt that massacres lie beyond explanation and defy the usual schemes. Allen claims: "Vonnegut had to find a new way to convey the horror, a new form to reflect a new kind of consciousness (81). The novel contains one scene in which Billy is placed in the hospital where a fellow soldier introduces him to the science fiction work of the writer Kilgore Trout, who is actually Vonnegut's fictional alter-ego. One of Billy's favorites, titled *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, is about "people whose mental diseases couldn't be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them" (Vonnegut 104). Like these four-dimensional diseases that cannot be fathomed by normal human minds, the barbarity and horror of the bombing can only be adequately grasped through the medium of science fiction.

In his opening chapter, Vonnegut writes: "this one is a failure, and it had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this: *Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.* It ends like this: *Poo-tee-tweet?"* The book is a failure in the traditional sense, given its lack of a

clear beginning, middle and end. This disorder may have been necessary to fulfill Vonnegut's intention of finally forming meaning from his painful memories and is fitting since Vonnegut himself does a great deal of traveling backward in time through his memory. Harris claims that the chronology of the novel, "short and jumbled and jangled" as it is, symbolizes the "artistic problems of Vonnegut, specifically his attempts over the years to reconstruct and formulate accurately the Dresden experience" (234). It serves a greater purpose however; it is one of several methods Vonnegut utilizes to convey his anti-war messages. Though on the surface the novel appears only to be a puzzling, random concoction of fantasy, its portrayal of war is extremely raw and honest. Scholar Thomas F. Marvin supports this view. He claims Vonnegut "breaks with conventional techniques of fiction to reinforce his readers' sense of the essential truthfulness of his war story, as opposed to the glorification of war so typical in fiction" (118). The "*Children's Crusade"* portion of the novel's title was formulated when Vonnegut paid a visit to an old war buddy whose wife accused him of writing another book that will make war "look just wonderful, so they'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies" (Vonnegut 14). Vonnegut promised his story would not be a typical war-idolizing book and thus he instantly spoils any potential suspense or heroism commonplace of a usual war story, for example: telling the reader the story's climax within the first chapter and revealing the death of Billy's wife long before that point in the story. Likewise, perhaps the most admirable and courageous character in the entire novel, Edgar Derby, survives the Dresden attack but is ironically shot dead after he is caught stealing a teapot from the rubble. Vonnegut abandons the usual narrative form in order to minimize the plot and instead direct the reader's attention toward the underlying themes. Conventional story structure is also defied by *Slaughterhouse-Five* by its lack of a true villain. Vonnegut believed that "nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting" and thus excludes any

completely unlikeable characters. This rhetorical technique places his work further outside the typical realm of war-glorifying stories and steers the story away from the issue of blame, instead exhibiting war as a senseless battle with no heroes and no villains.

The absence of standard character types who evoke feelings, such as sympathy or animosity, is also one of the novel's components contributing to its Brechtian style. Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, is known for his epic theater which encourages the audience to understand themselves as agents through the alienation affect. Brecht purposefully creates characters that are difficult to identify with or emotionally connect to because he believed that art should not just stimulate emotions but intellect as well (Newman). Both Brecht and Vonnegut utilize these mechanisms to inspire the contemplation of humanistic questions and serve as a call to action.

The fragmentation of the story's narrative by Billy's random jumps through time keeps the reader from becoming too preoccupied with his dilemmas that could potentially create feelings of sympathy. The abrupt transitions from one episode to the next often happen when Billy finds himself in uncomfortable or frightening situations, for example, the first time he is ever "unstuck in time" he is exhausted, malnourished, and just witnessed his fellow soldiers be murdered by the enemy. Many scholars interpret Billy's adventures as just an hallucinatory escape from reality or the product of mental stress and Vonnegut does allow for this reading of the story to be possible. The book contains several clues that support the psychological explanation, such as the descriptive details that are later repeated in an entirely different episode of Billy's life. While being transported in a boxcar to a POW camp, he acknowledges that "the locomotive and the last car of each train were marked with a striped banner of orange and black" (Vonnegut 69). Immediately after this, Billy travels in time to his daughter's wedding night—the

night of his abduction. He states: "the wedding had taken place that afternoon in a gaily striped tent in Billy's backyard. The stripes were orange and black" (Vonnegut 72). Additionally, Billy experiences a mental breakdown at one point and Vonnegut implies that he formulated the story of his trip to Tralfamadore after reading one of Kilgore Trout's novels in which the main character is abducted and put on display on an alien planet. On the other hand, Vonnegut also includes evidence pointing to the alternate interpretation; that Billy truly does experience time travel and an alien abduction. On occasion Vonnegut explicitly differentiates between what is fantasy and what is reality. He writes: "Billy was having a delightful hallucination. . .This wasn't time travel. It had never happened, never would happen. It was the craziness of a dying young man with his shoes full of snow" (Vonnegut 49). Perhaps Vonnegut intentionally leaves the truth ambiguous because as scholar Peter J. Reed argues, the uncertainty allows for "the range of psychological and thematic exploration is broadened" (21). The contradictory clues as to Billy's mental soundness are yet another binary rhetorical mechanism. The first interpretation of his time travel is symbolic of Vonnegut's own attempts to avoid troubling thoughts and memories; the second serves as a mechanism of alienation by presenting readers with obscure, un-relatable events.

Another characteristic of a Brechtian style work is the piece's awareness of its own status as a second-hand fabrication and accordingly, Billy's time travel serves yet another function; it constantly reminds the reader that this book is a work of fiction. The fantastic time and space adventures of Billy Pilgrim are obviously the "less" part of Vonnegut's disclaimer that these things happened "more or less" but the reader is further reminded of the purely imaginative invention of the science-fiction elements when Vonnegut occasionally intrudes into the story with his personal voice. One example of such a intrusion in the novel occurs during a slightly

comical incident in the POW camp latrine. Vonnegut writes: "An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (Vonnegut 125). While these first-person comments interrupt the story to emphasize the fancifulness of Billy's special abilities, they are just as effective as a reminder that the defenseless city of Dresden was in fact actually destroyed unexpectedly, leaving over 25,000 civilians dead (Biddle). Vonnegut's "more or less" statement explicitly indicates that the book is undeniably a work of fiction and its meaning comes from the abstract rather than the literal.

The most Brechtian device in the novel, however, is the character Billy Pilgrim with his utter acceptance of the Tralfamadorian perception of time and free will, which is a concept exclusive to Earth according to the Tralfamadorians. Billy's melancholic slogan "so it goes" appears 106 times in the novel, always after an unfortunate occurrence or death. His absolute indifference in all situations makes him a difficult character for readers to identify with. At times the phrase simply seems comical but as Peter J. Reed concludes, "it begins to sound irritating. . . Gradually we realize that our irritation is right. . . our resentment now directed to the fact which it emphasizes, that too many people are killed" (25). Like Brecht, whose goal is to bring to attention the dangers of accepting one's conditions as natural or inevitable, Vonnegut warns his audience to beware of becoming desensitized to death and being conditioned to accept injustice as an inevitable facet of life.

Some critics mistake Billy's belief in passivity and submission for Vonnegut's own personal opinion. Many have misguidedly labeled him a quietist and a nihilist, claiming that "the main idea emerging from *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to be that the proper response to life is one of resigned acceptance" (Merril & Scholl 144). The true aim of Vonnegut's work however, is to

firmly testify against moral deterioration and acceptance of murder in the name of war. The Tralfamadorian philosophy of complicity and denial of the unhappy moments is exactly what Vonnegut argues against. Billy's Brechtian traits make him into an a model of what not to be. His alarming lack of emotion is truly driven home at the moment of his death when he is speaking before a large crowd. He "predicts his own death within the hour. He laughs about it, invites the crowd to laugh with him. 'It is high time I was dead' he says" (Vonnegut 142). His calm acceptance of his own death alienates him from the reader and emphasizes the insanity of such an attitude. As Richard Giannone contends, "the absence of Billy's terror is itself a terror" and this unnatural response to one's own imminent death further broadens the alienation gap between Billy and the audience (91).

The most crucial underlying message derived from *Slaughterhouse-Five's* Brechtian features is that individuals must preserve their compassion as well as their ability to make their own judgments. Vonnegut states in an interview: "I continue to believe that artists—all artists—should be treasured as alarm systems" (qtd. in Reed 24). Upon being seized by the Tralfamadorian saucer Billy inquires, "why me?" and the creatures reply with: "there is no why." This same question is echoed later on by an American prisoner to a German guard, to which he answers, "Vy you? Vy anybody? (Vonnegut 91). By juxtaposing the reasoning of the guard with the Tralfamadorian philosophy, Vonnegut highlights the absurdity of blindly accepting that atrocities against other human beings simply have to be committed. This attitude is essentially guilt-free and the consequence of adopting such a point of view is the dehumanization of the enemy. Vonnegut believes this reality ensnared even the United States military during WWII, regardless of its label as "the good war." In an interview Vonnegut states: "When we went into the war, we felt our government was a respecters of life. . . Well, Dresden had no tactical value;

it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it" (qtd. in Allen 79). Vonnegut's concern for war's ability to corrupt one's morals manifests itself in both the Tralfamadorians' and the German guard's lack of an answer to the question "why me." This narrative parallel warns the audience that one must not fall prey to the delusions of complicity and dehumanization that are a result of warfare.

Many times Kurt Vonnegut is labeled a writer of black humor, however, the heart of his work shows that he is much more than that. His work "poisons" his readers with humanity, a term he formulated himself. He claims that there "is very good reason that you catch the people before they become generals and presidents and so forth and you poison their minds with...humanity, and however you want to poison their minds, it's presumably to encourage them to make a better world" (qtd. in Merril & Scholl 149). *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its "poisoning" of the mind is Vonnegut's way of finding a purpose for a traumatic experience. Billy Pilgrim serves as a binary role in this process: he is both the means by which Vonnegut is psychologically capable of creating meaning and due to his Brechtian features, he is the primary tool for conveying that meaning to the reader. Scholars also frequently regard Vonnegut as a satirist and though this label is not incorrect, inspecting his work through a Brechtian lens yields even more insight into the true substance of his work. *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not imply that wars will ever be completely obsolete; however, its call to action is relevant to 1945, 1969, and to all time. It is best epitomized by one of Vonnegut's most famous quotes: "There's only one rule that I know of, babies—God damn it, you've got to be kind."

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