

Kurt Vonnegut's Psychological Strategies in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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1. Introduction

It was in 1969, 24 years after witnessing the devastating air raid on Dresden, and 17 years after publishing his first novel, that Kurt Vonnegut published his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* based on his own war experience. John Tomedi attributes this achievement to three major causes: “The Writers Workshop at Iowa was pivotal, to be sure, in allowing Vonnegut to find a voice in which he may tell the story. In 1967, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed him time to travel to Dresden to research the novel. The windfall of his three-book-deal with Seymour Lawrence [...] gave Vonnegut the time and money necessary to begin devoting himself to his Dresden book whole-heartedly” (54-55). Yet Vonnegut confesses that “not many words about Dresden came from my mind then [...] not many words come now, either”(2).

In 1969, the number of soldiers stationed in Vietnam rose to over 550, 000, reaching its peak. It is quite natural that Vonnegut was frustrated at his country's involvement in the war and wanted to write “an anti-war book”(3) based on his Dresden experience, but he also knew that “there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers”(3). To overcome this difficulty, he exerted all of the science fiction techniques and devices which he had mastered as a popular science fiction writer, as well as his sense of humor. However, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was not intended to be science fiction at all, as J. Michael Crichton clearly declares: “his science fiction heritage is clear, but his purposes are very different: he is nearly always talking about the past, not the future” (110). At the same time, because of the science fiction techniques and elements, this book is quite different from other war novels, not to mention the Holocaust novels.

Vonnegut's special usage of science fiction elements as well as the influence of the Dresden air raid on his writing have been discussed by many critics. Leslie Fiedler was one of the first critics who recognized his usage of science fiction as a typical postmodern technique in which high art adopted American Pop culture. He observes: “Vonnegut has had what we now realize to be an advantage in this regard, since he began as a Pop writer” (7). Robert Scholes also recognizes the humor accompanying Vonnegut's usage of science fiction as an original way of presenting a serious theme: “The humor in Vonnegut's fiction is what enables us to contemplate the horror that he

finds in contemporary existence. It does not disguise the awful things perceived; it merely strengthens and comforts us to the point where such perception is bearable” (38).

Among the analyses of the forms and styles of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Peter Freese’s “*Slaughterhouse-Five; or, How to Storify an Atrocity*” is especially enlightening. Like Fiedler, he also recognizes Vonnegut’s efforts in “closing the customary gap between ‘high’ and ‘low’ ” (79). Furthermore, he examines how Vonnegut structured the book: “he uses the science-fiction motif of time-travel to break up not only the subjective experience but also the objective measurement of time and thereby to spatialize his tale” (79). He then concludes that the science fiction motif enabled Vonnegut to “achieve three goals at once, namely, to relativize the official versions of a historical event by reconstructing it from an idiosyncratic point of view, to thematize contemporary problems through a subjective consciousness, and to extrapolate the possibilities of tomorrow from the potential of today” (79). Freese’s analyses are convincing and his discussion helps us to understand the novel better but his interest is mostly focused on Vonnegut’s metafictional strategies such as “the blurring between fact and fiction as an expression of ontological insecurity, and the cumulation of multiply cross-referenced repetitions as an indication of man’s imprisonment in the ruling linguistic discourses” (80) so that the psychological strategies Vonnegut uses in this novel have not yet been fully discussed in his or other studies.

In this essay, therefore, I would like to examine Vonnegut’s usage of science fiction elements from a psychological point of view, especially in relation to cognitive dissonance, in order to clarify the psychological structure of this novel and its characteristics as an anti-war novel in the 1960s.

2. The Psychological Structure of Billy’s Time Travel

At the very beginning of the description of Billy’s time travel, Vonnegut repeats “he says” in order to insinuate that Billy’s time travel is only what he claims and that the narrator-author has a different view of it:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

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. He has seen his birth and death many times, **he says**, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

He says.

Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, **he says**, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. (23, emphasis mine)

In spite of Vonnegut's insinuation, most critics accept the nonlinear time structures of Billy's story according to his description of them. Sharon Sieber even introduces the chaos theory of the twentieth century and James Gleick's opinion that "chaos and arbitrary or random events, characterized by a lack of any perceivable pattern, often involve the perception of yet a larger circle" (149). Their analyses are right in a way but Billy's "spastic" condition is not so unpredictable as he claims. His narrative is structured in a far more logical order than at first appears.

The scenes Billy visits are classified into two groups—during the war and during normal days. And the scenes during the war are arranged in a straight linear time structure: from his being shipped to the European theater, through being missing in action, the capture by the Germans, the dispatch to Dresden, the prison life and the air raid there, to the end of the war. In contrast with Billy's war memories, the scenes during Billy's normal days move back and forth in time. Yet, there is also a pattern: they correspond to Billy's emotional reaction to his war memories and through the process of jumping from one scene to another, he mitigates the pain attached to the recollection of his war experience. For example, Billy says that he came unstuck in time for the first time, when he was too tired to keep moving in the snowy forest behind the German line. His life was at risk then so that he is reminded of his childhood when he was almost drowned during his swimming training. In both cases, his life was jeopardized but the latter experience is one step farther from his death because the incident occurred in normal circumstances under his father's care. The subsequent scenes are similarly related to death but not his own, and when the scenes change, Billy gradually moves away from his own original terrifying moment and finally ends up in a happy memory so that he is ready to resume his recollection of the war again.

The two groups of scenes Billy visits are thus woven together with each other in

consolation and entertainment, gradually leading the reader to the most heartrending war experience for Vonnegut, the Dresden raid. This is why Peter Freese thinks that Billy Pilgrim “evokes Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and insinuates that Billy is a contemporary Everyman on his burdensome journey through an earthly valley of tears” (73). John Tomedi also observes: “The extraordinary effect of this [narrating the circumstances of the event like a Tralfamadorian] is to make all events, no matter *when* they occurred, to *lead up to Dresden*” (62). Therefore, Stanley Schatt is in a way right when he announces: “*Slaughterhouse-Five* is constructed much like Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Just as that novel’s Yossarian is compelled to think about Snowden’s death yet finds it too painful and tries to avoid the memory, so too is a reluctant Billy Pilgrim forced to return again and again to the fire-bombing of Dresden” (82). Yet, Schatt fails to recognize that there is a large difference between Yossarian and Billy. Yossarian can strongly resist the war and run away from it but Billy is always helpless and far more confused than Yossarian.

3. The Use of the Tralfamadore to Reduce Cognitive Dissonance

Billy’s helplessness is more clearly demonstrated in his belief in the other science fictional elements -- the outer space planet, Tralfamadore, and its inhabitants’ four-dimensional view. He starts earnestly advocating them after the unexpected death of his wife, Valencia:

“The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. [...]” (26-27)

Valencia died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to the breakdown of her car’s exhaust system on her way to visit Billy in hospital. Billy miraculously survived the plane crash which killed all the other passengers and crew. He seems to have had much more reason to die than his wife who was in good health and only wanted to see him in hospital. Yet he survived and his wife died. Being ironically contrasted with his own lucky survival, the circumstances of Valencia’s unexpected death look all the more absurd and extravagant so that they insinuate that her existence was meaningless and insignificant enough to be lost in such a farcical way. Billy could not face this fact calmly because Valencia was important and essential to his life. To preserve the

dignity of her life, therefore, he believed in such a science fictional element as the Tralfamadorian four-dimensional view, because if those who die only *appear* to die, he could mitigate the pain caused to him by the loss of his beloved wife as well as annul the absurdity and inhumanity of its circumstances.

In this book, the absurd circumstances of Valencia's death are juxtaposed with the devastating destruction caused by the Dresden air raid. This raid is no more acceptable to Billy than his wife's death. At the first sight of Dresden, Billy was amazed at the old city with its cultural splendors. "It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven" (148). It must have seemed to him to represent human wisdom and virtues. Besides, he saw ordinary life going on there. "There were theaters and restaurants. There was a zoo. The principal enterprises of the city were medicine and food-processing and the making of cigarettes" (149). Dresden did not seem to have much to do with military action. Even those who took care of Billy and other American prisoners of the war there were either young boys or men past middle age and did not much resemble a part of the military force. As a result, the Dresden air raid seemed to Billy a meaningless military action, killing civilians and destroying a magnificent product of civilization constructed by excellent human talents and efforts. It is difficult for him to find any proper explanation for such an atrocious, indiscriminate destruction. Yet if he believes in the Tralfamadorian four-dimensional view, the many lives lost in it and the city mercilessly destroyed will exist in a better condition at another time. The Tralfamadorian view alleviates the pain accompanying the loss of too many lives and such a beautiful city. His belief is therefore a form of escapism as Merrill and Scholl perceive: "Faced with the sheer horror of life, epitomized by World War II and especially the fire-bombing of Dresden, Billy 'escapes' to Tralfadore" (145).

Billy's escapism looks perfectly natural because it is a well-known psychological attempt to "reduce cognitive dissonance." One's mind becomes unsettled in a situation which is difficult to explain. This is the phenomenon called "cognitive dissonance" and one tends to look for an explanation to relieve the inner tension created by it. Leon Festinger, one of the most eminent psychologists in this area, describes this tendency: "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance" (3). Festinger furthermore comments: "persons frequently have cognitive elements which deviate markedly from reality" (11). He observes that in an unusual situation one can

easily fall into absurd reasoning without facing reality and that the more difficult the situation is to face, the more easily one retreats from reality and relies on an absurd explanation.

In writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut was highly aware of this psychological phenomenon. When Billy had a nervous breakdown, his bed in the hospital was next to that of Eliot Rosewater. “Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war” (101). Rosewater is wise enough to be able to explain what Billy unconsciously does. He thus suggests to a psychiatrist: “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (101). It is also Rosewater who introduces Billy to Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer, and “Kilgore Trout became Billy’s favorite living author and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read” (101).

In *The Psychology of “Making Oneself Believe,”* Satoru Kikuchi asserts that it is actually important to divert one’s mind from reality when it is unbearable: “positive illusion plays the role of a favorable remedy for one’s depression” (203). Kikuchi however comments that “because our cognition level becomes very low when we are depressed, we tend to fall into a fallacy to get rid of depression and lift our spirits” (203). This is why he concludes that it is important for us to “keep our heart hot and our mind cool” (204) in order to live wisely.

Billy’s belief in Tralfamadore and time travel provides him what Rosewater calls “wonderful *new* lies,” as long as it helps him to survive the war and his wife’s death. At the same time, when his belief looks merely absurd, the difficulty and atrocity of the experience which has driven him into it is all the more impressive to the reader. Yet, it must be noted that Billy does not seem to keep his mind cool enough to live wisely with his lies. In fact, Vonnegut implies a warning against his beliefs. Lawrence Broer deciphers “Tralfamadore” and reveals that it is an anagram of “OR FATAL DREAM” (87). Tralfamadorians take it for granted that no one can prevent the Universe from being destroyed because “[t]he moment is *structured* that way” (117). They assume that everything is already there and predetermined. Their view induces the danger of fatalism so that Tonny Tanner suspects that it is “a culpable moral indifference” that “[t]he Tralfamadorian response to life is ‘guilt-free’ ” (129). This is why Vonnegut

clearly announces, at the end of the book, that his response to the Tralfamadorian view is different from Billy's: "If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed" (211).

As "his method for keeping going" (60), Billy hangs up The Serenity Prayer: "GOD GRANT ME / THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT / THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE, / COURAGE / TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN, / AND WISDOM ALWAYS / TO TELL THE / DIFFERENCE" (60). Yet believing in such unrealistic dreams as time travel and Tralfamadore and yielding to the Tralfamadorian fatalistic four-dimensional view, he disregards all deaths without distinguishing between accidental and inevitable deaths and deaths inflicted by men in wars and massacres. "He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends" (30) in the war, and even after the war, he continues to be called "Billy," a diminutive of "William" with a childish image because he is so thoroughly helpless that "[a]mong the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (60).

4. Vonnegut's Unique Situation in the War and Its Postmodern Characteristics

Through Billy's extraordinary time travel, Vonnegut opened a window on the confusion of our reality. Sharon Sieber observes this and asserts that "[h]is dizzying travels through and beyond any present moment introduce into the novel the modern fragmentation of perspective, perception, storyline, the structuring of thought and experience along associative patterns" (148). Sieber uses the word "modern," but she means "late 20th century" and the characteristics of this world emphasized by Billy's time travel are typically "postmodern."

Those postmodern characteristics are further strengthened by the absurd incidents which are abundant in Billy's life. Billy was in danger of being killed by the army of his own side in the Dresden air raid. When he was running behind the battle front with the two scouts and Roland Weary, the two scouts were the first to die, in spite of having the greatest ability and training as soldiers among the four. Among the prisoners of war, Edgar Derby, who had the most common sense as an old high school teacher, was executed for plundering a teapot he carelessly picked up from the raided city. Similar absurdities are encountered by him outside the war, too. His father was shot to death while it was he who was hunting. And in the airplane crash, he alone survived only to

learn of his wife's accidental death instead.

In this way, Vonnegut emphasizes absurdity and uncertainty in our life so much that any naïve truism about life could come to seem meaningless. This is why his straightforward pacifism seems nothing but a virtue praised by all but practiced by few when Vonnegut pompously preaches to his sons:

I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.

I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. (19)

It is also true that Vonnegut sometimes looks as helpless as Billy. Whenever someone's death is mentioned, Vonnegut adds: "So it goes." Willis E. McNelly notes: "The words become a fatalistic chant, a dogmatic utterance, to permit Vonnegut himself to endure" (126). The phrase, "So it goes," not only helps Vonnegut endure the deaths, it allows him to be indifferent to them, implying that not only Billy but also Vonnegut himself cannot do much about those deaths. This is why this phrase sounds pessimistic. And the same pessimism is also detected in "*Poo-tee-weet?*" , which Vonnegut claims is "[a]ll there is to say about a massacre" (19).

Vonnegut's confounding ambivalence must be related to his unique situation in the Dresden air raid. Under the title of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he describes it: "A FOURTH-GENERATION GERMAN-AMERICAN / [...] WHO, AS AN AMERICAN INFANTRY SCOUT / *HORS DE COMBAT*, / AS A PRISONER OF WAR, / WITNESSED THE FIRE-BOMBING / OF DRESDEN, GERMANY, / "THE FLORENCE OF THE ELBE," / A LONG TIME AGO, / AND SURVIVED TO TELL THE TALE." In the war, Vonnegut fought as an American soldier against Germany, the country of his ancestors. He was then captured by Germans as their enemy and brought to their old city, Dresden. However, he found it beautiful and splendid and together with German citizens there, he was bombed by the Allies, his own side. He was, therefore, in a unique position to observe the war and the destruction of Dresden from the points of view of both opposing sides. And understanding the opinions and feelings of both sides, he could neither take any side rashly nor make any easy comment.

He has fallen into a typically postmodern and indefinite, ambiguous position.

Consequently, instead of making any clear comment, he quotes President Harry S. Truman's well-known announcement to excuse the usage of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima: "*The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor*" (185). He also impassively introduces Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker's vindictive announcement, "*I remember who started the last war*" (187) and his regret at the number of Allied casualties because it was much larger than the 135,000 casualties in the attack on Dresden, as well as British Air Marshal, Sir Robert Saundby's justifying explanation of the Dresden raid: "*It was one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances*" (187). These are typical explanations of the usage of the atomic bomb and the Dresden raid. And his manner of introducing them is too detached to present them convincingly so that Vonnegut does not seem to be persuaded by any of them. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that he never openly criticizes them, either.

Vonnegut is inarticulate when he mentions the Dresden raid to a University of Chicago professor and when the professor tells him, in return, about the concentration camps and other atrocities Germans committed. All he can say is: "I know, I know. I know" (10). The impatience in his voice suggests his disagreement but not more than that, revealing postmodern "aporia" in his attitudes. In this way, he is not different from Billy. Billy hears Prof. Bertram Copeland Rumford, a Harvard history professor, who wrote twenty-seven volumes about World War II but excluded a description of the Dresden raid, explaining to his secretary that he omitted it "[f]or fear that a lot of bleeding hearts [...] might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do" (191). All Billy can tell Rumford then is: "I was there [in Dresden]" (191). It implies his resistance to Rumford's exclusion of the tragedy in Dresden but he cannot protest enough for Rumford to understand his protest. After all, because they witnessed the Dresden raid, neither Billy nor Vonnegut can excuse it for any reason, and yet neither can they blame anybody for it or for excusing it, either.

5. *Slaughterhouse-Five* as "a Really Wonderful New Lie"

Vonnegut experienced the Second World War from the point of view of both sides and is wise enough to have learned all kinds of views from both sides. This is why his attitudes toward the war are as full of postmodern uncertainty and ambiguity as

Billy's life is. It cannot be denied, either, that Vonnegut has a streak of fatalism and pessimism. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that Vonnegut is not Billy. Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl complain that "most of Vonnegut's critics seem intent on reading the book [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] as if it *were* the work of a quietist" (143). This, they argue, is due to the fact that those critics think that Vonnegut is saying the same thing as Billy does, though in fact "Vonnegut offers many hints that the Tralfamadorians do not exist" (144). Besides Merrill and Scholl, Lawrence R. Broer also objects to "the standard view of Vonnegut as fatalist" (86) and observes the difference between Vonnegut and Billy: "Vonnegut is careful to dissociate himself from Billy as from no character before" (86).

If his preaching to his sons is not as effective as it is supposed to be, it shows that Vonnegut is different from Billy, who "was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do" (60) when the Vietnam War was escalated. Billy even finds his son, Robert, clean and neat in the uniform of the Green Berets as if the Vietnam War could have done something good to him. In a similar situation, Vonnegut, who asks his sons not to take part in massacres under any circumstances, would never be satisfied.

A still more important difference between them is that Vonnegut could really take a more definite step than Billy. He knew how difficult it was to write "an anti-war novel." He also knew: "People aren't supposed to look back" (22). Against all of his good judgment, however, he wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He regards his book as "a failure" (22) but must have thought "it was so human" (22) to write it, just as he comments on the deed of Lot's wife, who looked back in spite of God's prohibition. And this must be why Todd Davis regards Vonnegut as a Postmodern humanist, defining postmodern humanism as follows: "while postmodern humanism denies an essential individuality to the subject, it does not disregard the value of human life" (31). He claims that Vonnegut "offers a hopeful solution to the postmodern condition" (31) and distinguishes his positive writing from Billy's stories of resignation:

Time travel is Billy's therapy; his stories are his delusions.

Conversely, Vonnegut uses writing as a form of therapy and social protest. Unlike Billy, Vonnegut never loses sight of the physical reality of war in the telling of his tale. (79)

As the main character of an anti-war novel, Billy needs to be weak enough to

reduce the “cognitive dissonance” caused by his war experience and to escape into a science fictional belief. His belief can become all the more extraordinary because of his helplessness. And the more extravagant the belief which he uses to reduce the “cognitive dissonance” becomes, the more terrible and bewildering Billy’s war experience looks. Billy also needs to be a weak anti-hero so as to allow Vonnegut to supply various points of view on the war without an authentic comment and thus to establish postmodern characteristics in the book. Above all, being an anti-hero, Billy prevents young people who were born after the war and have not experienced its grim reality, from being attracted by any war experience, as Vonnegut promised his friend’s wife, Mary: “If I ever do finish it [my book], though, I give you my word of honor: there won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne” (15). As an added effect, Billy’s fantastic stories of the outer space aliens and his life with a gorgeous young woman, Montana Wildhuck, following his abduction, entertain the readers of the younger generation and encourage them to keep reading the book based on the sober reality of the war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, therefore, a really successful anti-war novel for the younger generation after the war without incurring any risk of a future war. And writing such an anti-war novel despite all the odds is a good way for Vonnegut to practice the obligation and responsibility to resist any wars and massacres.

Wayne D. McGinnis indicates that the book consists of an open cycle and because “the cycle itself reflects man’s own nature as he experiences the regeneration of immortality in his mind,” (121) he regards *Slaughterhouse-Five* as “his[Vonnegut’s] best and even most hopeful novel to date” (121). If his unique position in the war and his postmodern liberalism prevented Vonnegut from indicating more clearly how he should understand the Dresden air raid or how we should prevent another war and massacre, he commanded the courage to change what he can as a writer and as a man and wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an anti-war novel. In this book, he used science fiction only for his literary strategies and retained a realistic view of the world. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the fruit of Vonnegut’s efforts to “keep his heart hot and his mind cool” and it is this book that really fulfills the criteria of what Eliot Rosewater calls “wonderful *new* lies.”

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