

Existential crisis in Kurt Vonnegut's slaughterhouse-five

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Abstract

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a science fiction novel by Kurt Vonnegut, depicts the life of a soldier, Billy Pilgrim. Unstuck in time, kidnapped by aliens, and caught in a massacre of war, Billy certainly lives an eventful life, but also witnesses a great deal of death. The excessive loss of life to which Billy Pilgrim becomes a witness forces him to question the very meaning of life as he suffers from existential crisis. Billy Pilgrim experiences tumultuous external influences and in some situations loses awareness of his own humanity. When he falls out of this more authentic mode of being, a certain meaninglessness about life creeps in. Only when Billy gains his composure and tries to understand himself does a sort of sanity return to his world. In Billy's circumstances—being tossed back and forth through time it is impossible for him to define his own existence in reference to what he perceives as the external world, because he has become "unstuck in time".

Keywords: existentialism, war

1. Introduction

Having experienced the abject failure of all rationalist thought and evaluation in helping cope with an absurd universe, the novelist of the absurd, of whom Vonnegut is representative, seem to indulge in fantasies of their own sake, in an attempt to go beyond rational understanding of things in hope that what traditional reason and logic has not been able to do, tangential and lateralized perception might provide, some inkling of form in the chaos. Using fantasy and ironic humour, Vonnegut tersely examines the basic philosophical questions concerned with human existence. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the struggle of the main character Billy Pilgrim is that of being "unstuck in time". What does this mean for him? In a sense it is a threat to his very humanity, his existence, as humans are used to define themselves in terms of their past as well as their potential future. By taking away Billy's familiarity with and grounding in time, Kurt Vonnegut makes Billy vulnerable.

2. Existential Crisis

Kurt Vonnegut explores existentialism in the narrative by arguing that absurdism represents the world more accurately than rationalism. All the protagonists in Vonnegut's novels exist in an environment which is basically without meaning. The ultimate statement of this meaninglessness is manifested in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the novel, traumatic events illustrate that the world is neither fair, nor ordered. Characters' lives are dictated by events far beyond their understanding. The Bombing of Dresden demonstrate a lack of innate justice. In fact, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a book about death. It is a book about human's favourite form of death: war. For Vonnegut, war has no meaning whatsoever. As Michael Crichton observes in his review of the book, "There are just people, doing what people usually do to each other" (Crichton 35). Even though there may be certain countries contending against one another and certain ideologies being fought for and against, Vonnegut—at least in his role as author of and character in *Slaughterhouse-Five*—sees nothing except the brute facts: lots of death.

Vonnegut doesn't think that these brute facts can be papered over with the meaningfulness of political struggle. One can find the protagonist Billy Pilgrim struggling over to find a meaning out of the chaotic meaninglessness around him. But what it leads to is existential crisis. He is tragically compelled to create meaning for himself in a world that lacks any manifest grace, order, or purpose.

A meaningless universe, and the existence of the individual in that universe, forms a major part of the novels by Kurt Vonnegut. It has been suggested in fact, that 111 Vonnegut is providing "an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain" (Klinkowitz 108). He combines fiction and reality, history and fantasy, pain and humour. The suffering of Vonnegut's fictional world is both existential and physical. At the root of existential thought is a search for the meaning of existence evidenced in Vonnegut's work through his often-repeated question "What are people for?" The author examines man's search for purpose in spite of the nagging doubt that a purpose will ever be found. Those critics who label Vonnegut as existential, rightfully call attention to the imaginative world that he juxtaposes with the physical world and emphasize his focus on the imagination as a means of functioning, but they also mistakenly ignore the fact that in his novels the real world rivals the fantastic for importance. The writer struggles to understand a world where people flagrantly hurt others with little regard for the consequences. Why do people use their power to act in such vicious ways towards others? He argues that, because of naturalistic determinism, people are not in control of their actions; instead, they simply react to the biological, physical, social, and economic environment in which they have been placed.

Vonnegut uses the backdrop of the bombing of Dresden to explore the physical limits of mankind. By repeating "so it goes" after each death throughout the novel, Vonnegut underscores the fact that death is a certainty from which no human being can escape. No one, not even God, could do anything to change that. His statement on God, Christ is another of his striking notion about the meaninglessness of

this Universe. He intends to say that the belief in an external world is an illusion. An attempt to create meaning out of the world by believing that one is on the earth to serve some purpose of God is futile. The characters in Vonnegut's novels suggest that reality is in the human mind and the attempt to attach reality to the mystical is the cause of frustration. So, death comes to human beings simply because they are alive. The narrator also uses this phrase to illustrate the human connection to, and insignificance in, the physical world by repeating "so it goes" after the deaths of other animate and inanimate objects: the novel, a bottle of champagne, a dog, body lice, pigs, and cows. In fact, the countless deaths to which he becomes a witness pushes him to the edge of insanity.

There are certain indications that Billy has learned little about himself, that he is the individual multiplied and conforming, for example the middle-aged Billy attends a Lions Club meeting at which a Major in the Marines talks about the war in Vietnam. The Major had been there on two separate tours of duty. He told of many terrible and many wonderful things he had seen. He was in favour of increased bombings. Of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason. Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder at the hideous things he himself had seen bombings do. He was simply having lunch with the Lion's Club, of which he was past president. Yet, against this seeming insensitivity, we must set the fact that Billy is given to inexplicable hours of weeping, as though his distress had gone underground. The existential adventurer is alternately attracted and repelled by war; that he has no sure bearings in the war context is probably due to that absence of 'sustaining frames of tradition.' There are powerful counterattractions to the fearsome engagement of war.

Vonnegut's task in writing the novel was to bridge the increasing gap between the horrors of life in the twentieth century and our imaginative ability to comprehend their full actuality. Human beings slaughtering their fellow human beings-coldly, methodically, scientifically, in numbers heretofore inconceivable. If the First World War was a shock with its machine guns, its heavy artillery, and its trench-warfare charges into no-man's land, what of the next war with its saturation bombings, its death camps, its atomic bombs? Vonnegut had to find a new way to convey the horror, a new form to reflect a new kind of consciousness. He used irony, to be sure, but he went further, by altering the fundamental processes of narration itself. Being a witness to such horrors it is only natural for the person involved to have some kind of existential crisis through which the author himself passed through and which is also reflected in the character created by him, Billy Pilgrim.

Billy is captured along with a hopeless tank gunner named Roland Weary, in the Battle of the Bulge, the last great German counter-offensive of the war. Freezing in inadequate clothing, hungry, frightened out of his wits, Billy becomes "unstuck in time" for the first time, finding himself living moments out of his past or his future. Weary dies, in transit to the POW camp, of gangrene of the feet which he had claimed was caused when the time-tripping Billy abstractedly stepped on him. Before he dies, Weary tells the story to Paul Lazzaro, who vows to avenge Weary's death by tracking Billy down after the war and killing him. Lazzaro is an emblem of the fact that a soldier can never really escape his war experiences-that they will always track

him down even years later. In the POW camp, the dispirited group of Americans is greeted by some hale and hearty Englishmen, who have been growing healthy on good Red Cross food exercise and English optimism. They are the opposite of Billy, the fatalistic, dishevelled weakling who simply drifts from one disaster to the next in helpless resignation. The Americans are then sent to Dresden, a supposedly "open" city, where February 13, 1945 becomes the most significant day in their lives and the city's history. An event which becomes the basis for the crisis through which Billy goes through all his life. He suffers to gather together the meaning of life. He asks whether there is any meaning for life or is it just a myth. The magnanimous proportion of the destruction of Dresden destroys Billy's viewpoint of life.

The cracks in the American dream show through Billy's apparently successful post-war life. Valencia is a parody of consumerism, since she constantly consumes candy while promising to lose weight in order to please Billy sexually. Billy's son appears to be headed for jail as a teen-ager before he joins the Green Berets and goes off to fight in Vietnam. Even a brief look at Billy Pilgrim's mental state reveals a classic case of schizophrenia. The shock of war coupled with tragically disillusioning childhood experiences has clearly crippled Billy's ability to lead any kind of normal life-to love or believe in people, work, society or God and has led consequently to withdrawal from human contact into a world of bizarre fantasy. Not that Billy's suffering, his fear of annihilation, is based on delusion. His withdrawal is a natural reaction to the very real terrors of his world and ours.

Billy creates this planet Tralfamadore in his imagination in order to avoid his human responsibilities. He had to create that Eden-like paradise which was his escape from learning the responsibilities of wakeful humanity. Ludicrous-looking extraterrestrials kidnap Billy Pilgrim and appear to teach him wonderful ways to cope with suffering and death. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy confronts the possibility of death on many levels in order to understand his own humanity. He faces the Second World War fighting action, old age and the suffering that comes with it, a plane accident, as well as his actual death at the hands of a vengeful former comrade. He is shown his history and future by the Tralfamadorians who want to help him cope with his condition of being "unstuck." In his life up to that point, Billy seemed to live in a daze. Beneath his hapless wandering in the snow behind German lines was a disconnectedness from his own existence. Billy didn't want to know what was going on; he wasn't trying to become conscious of what was happening to him in German captivity. Billy encountered the world as a "listless plaything of enormous forces" (160). He wore a ridiculous jacket that was so small and crumpled that it looked like a "large black, three-cornered hat", just because it had been handed to him. Even the narrator had to conclude that "everything was pretty much all right with Billy" (158). But eventually he learned to see things the Tralfamadorian way, as a series of -marvelous moments". Granted, the Tralfamadorians were as emotionless as shock-stricken Billy, but they were that way for a different reason: solemnity.

Up to a certain point in the novel, the meaningfulness of Billy's life depends upon his being able to live in the mode of being of a soldier—to be what it is to be a soldier. Living up to this expectation leaves him quite awkwardly situated.

He doesn't know how to fight, much less walk quietly or bundle up or find food to survive. Billy is lost in a world that is completely defined by others meanings: who he should fight, who he should be scared of, and who he should talk to. Another soldier traveling with Billy, Roland Weary, has successfully absorbed what it is to be a soldier. Jerome Klinkowitz observes that "Weary is possessed by images" (Klinkowitz 90). He calls the group the "Three Musketeers," he wields brutal weapons, and he lugs the contents of multiple care packages around on his person wherever he goes, but does no more virtual fighting than Billy. It is clear that inauthentic figures such as Weary are intended by Vonnegut to be one of the absurd features about a war. The aspiration to others modes of existence is formally rejected by Vonnegut in the first chapter. When discussing his ideas for the novel with his friend Bernard V. O'Hare, O'Hare's wife becomes worried that he will write it as if the war was glamorous, with John Wayne-like characters awaiting praise for their glorious activities. Vonnegut reassures her that he is actually planning to make it sound like as foolish an activity as a children's crusade—the prime example of an inauthentic event if there ever was one. The lesson, if any, to be learned from war, is that once its overarching meaning is taken away and it is examined authentically, it appears quite different.

Through a variety of elements and especially the character of the protagonist, Vonnegut unmasks the postmodern – especially the American – morality which has proved to be a mere facet covering endless layers of absurdity and cruelty. Vonnegut bases his narrative on the juxtaposition between stressing the inevitability of the occurrence of the apocalyptic moment and between the suggestion that the world is apt to experience eternity) the text's title is Vonnegut's initial attempt to deconstruct the romantic facet of the traumatic effects of wars rather than merely glamorizing them. Billy Pilgrim is exemplary of those children crusaders. In the opening chapter of the novel, Vonnegut openly declares this idea: "We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (12). This idea is recurrently echoed throughout the novel where there are several incidents highlighting – whether directly or indirectly – Vonnegut's aim. Vonnegut's chosen characters as well tend to unveil the fake postmodern American pretences. Billy Pilgrim, Edgar Derby, Rosewater, as well as the extraterrestrial Tralfamadoreans all help in pinpointing Vonnegut's claim. Billy's first encounter with Tralfamadoreans is very important from the view of his existential crisis. Humans as a whole like to believe that there is a greater meaning to e' cry thing but that is not necessarily always the case.

'Welcome aboard, Mr. Pilgrim', said the loudspeaker. 'Any questions?'

Billy licked his lips, thought a while, inquired at last: 'Why me?'

That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is.

Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?'

Yes.' Billy, in fact, had a paperweight in his office which was a blob of polished amber with three ladybugs embedded in it.

'Well. Here we are, Mr. Pilgrim. Trapped in the amber of this moment.

There is no why.' (63)

Billy Pilgrim's life is a parody of the American dream, a representative of the postmodern America and a victim of the American myth. Pilgrim's life represents the facet of the American dream; whereas his underside follows the other formula of our time: mental breakdown, shock therapy, emptiness. Ironically, Pilgrim is supposed to have survived the war and to have witnessed the American victory. On the surface, Pilgrim is part of those allied forces that have conquered their German enemy; however, in reality, he returns as a "shell-shocked victim" who suffers from "disillusionment and depression". Something that haunted him throughout his life. It was the brutal scenes that he witnessed as a soldier which made him question the very meaning of life. Whether there is any purpose to one's life? What does existence means after all? After his supposed triumph and survival, Pilgrim returns home, constructs an optometric business, and makes a family; that means achieving the constituents of the American dream. Nevertheless, after the experience he has passed through, Pilgrim loses his faith in this totalitarian image of the American morality, but is unable to project this growing sense of fear and disillusionment. Therefore, he turns into an escapist who finds no way out except creating his own Utopia; a world which calls for eternity and humanism. It was his way of creating meaning of the world around him.

Pilgrim is not a single case; on the contrary, this same experience is shared on behalf of other characters as well. Eliot Rosewater — Pilgrim's chamber mate in the veteran's hospital - has been a captain in the Second World War and has had terrible experiences in the war that have led him to resort to drinking and reading science fiction stories. He shares with Pilgrim the postmodern self's distrust in a world controlled by a strive for destruction which is often advocated for and protected by the nation's leaders. The victims of these destructive schemes are not only the soldiers who get murdered or imprisoned in the battlefields; the victims are all citizens from all parties who find the world they live in a bare man-made dystopia which renders the individual's life empty and vague. Vonnegut's doubt in and re-evaluation of American morality is further manifested through the character of Edgar Derby. A middle-aged school teacher who volunteers for the war, Derby is presented as the American patriot who idealizes the American values. His stand is not intended to be ironic; on the contrary, it reveals the conflict within Vonnegut himself. The nature of Derby's death accentuates the postmodern traumatic loss. Derby is not killed in the war; he is rather executed for stealing a teapot. This trivial accident brings the end to this sole idealist putting under erasure the role of heroes in the contemporary world.

Vonnegut tells that Billy sees his withdrawal from the real world as a "screen" or what in psychiatry is called a "mask," a deliberately cultivated strategy of maintaining personal identity and freedom by withdrawing behind some sort of psychologically protective shield. And putting another, false self forward. The danger of such an inner, defensive manoeuvre is that, as in Billy's case and the case of other Vonnegut protagonists before him, the mask may become compulsive and hence more a threat than a safeguard to the sanity it is meant to preserve. Withdrawal from an outer world of people and things into one of phantom fulfilment may lead to a total inability to act, and finally to a state of non-being and a desire for death. R. D. Laing likens such a fate to living in a "concentration camp," in which the

imagined advantages of safety and freedom from the control of others are tragically illusory. By putting a "psychic tourniquet" on his ailing soul, Laing says, the individual's detached self develops a form of "existential gangrene." In this light, it is no small coincidence that Billy Pilgrim should confuse a building on the grounds of his Dresden prison camp with a building on Tralfamadore, that one prison guard at both places should converse with Billy in English, that Billy should serve as an object of ridicule and entertainment for Dresdeners and Tralfamadoreans alike, that similar objects-horseshoes, dentures and so forth-should show up in both places, and that finally, both places should come to an end by fire as a result of apocalyptic explosions. Vonnegut's point is that one hell holds Billy prisoner as surely as the other but in the case of his Tralfamadorean fantasy, Billy himself holds the key to the locked doors of Bedlam inside his own mind.

Billy equips his mind to cope with all the horrors and terrors around him. His crisis, his inability to identify himself with the meaning of the world created by others is primarily due to the events at Dresden. Having forced to be a part of one of the deadliest massacres in the human history, the incident haunts him for the rest of his life. Billy though being a soldier, is mocked by many due to his appearance which for many doesn't suits according to the dignity of an army man. This itself shows that how little stamina he had to cope with the gruesome realities of the war. But he did and that was by the creation of such an imaginary world like that of the Tralfamadoreans. Along with many soldiers he is also forced to walk over the dead bodies of many after the horrific incident at Dresden, the images there continue to haunt him and snatches away his ability to have a normal life like any other individual. What this existential crisis cost him was to have a better understanding of his life, to look at life like any other individual, because he couldn't anymore view life as like it is being perceived by others for his idea of the world and its meaning becomes shattered following what can be called a 'massacre' at Dresden. Vonnegut who himself was a victim to such a horrific situation explores and demonstrates such a condition through Billy. The result of such a crisis is that though he loves his family, he is never able to know them better because he is always trying to cope with meaninglessness in the world.

But is this all just a fantasy? Did Billy really dream this entire thing, up? And is it really important whether it's fantasy or not, since the result was the same? It is important, because Vonnegut's message changes if Billy's experiences were real. If the Tralfamadoreans really abducted him, and if their philosophy is legitimate, then Billy's Dresden experience would have been less important. All of the destruction he witnessed didn't have that large of an impact on him, it was the alien abduction that really changed his life. Dresden was real for him and its impact profound, and it can be that Tralfamadoreans were fantasy. And, given that, the main point is still valid: Billy, after witnessing horrible acts of nonsensical violence, generated an elaborate daydream in his psyche that supplied meaning and purpose. There are clues in the novel that support the contention that the Tralfamadorean experience was all a dream. They begin on the first page: -All of this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (I).

The war parts are true; the narrator assures us. But what about the rest? This narrator cannot be completely trusted. Further into the novel, after Billy has escaped from Dresden,

he is recovering in a veteran's hospital next to Eliot Rosewater, a science fiction fan.

They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So, it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden. So, they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help. (128)

Billy is suffering from a disease of the mind, he is trying to resolve this existential crisis in his psyche - that is what Vonnegut is telling the reader. And he does, when he manufactures a story-a science fiction story-later in his life. So the Tralfamadoreans are a fantasy. What are the implications of this? The only important implication is how it affects Vonnegut's theme and his purpose in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. If the Tralfamadoreans are a fantasy in the delusional mind of Billy Pilgrim, then two questions must be asked. "Why do they exist?" and "What caused them to appear?" The first can be answered by saying they exist to protect Billy. His mind was struggling to cope with all of the destruction and death he had seen, and could not. Years later, when his own death appeared imminent, the Tralfamadorean fantasy first appeared. That answers the second question. Billy had seen so much carnage, but only when he was about to die did he finally resolve the issues in his psyche. Free will is something that human beings boast about and to which even the Tralfamadoreans stands as witness. But the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents a meaningless world in which the protagonist Billy pilgrim is caught and is unable to change anything. In fact at a point he realises that it is worthless to attempt for such a change.

And the 'issues in his psyche' are really what *Slaughterhouse-Five* is all about. This book's meaning runs deeper than 'war is bad.' Billy Pilgrim is an everyman, with no exceptional abilities or aptitudes who witnesses something incredible, and refuses to accept that there could be no good reason for it. He refuses to accept the idea that there are absurd things in life, because if death can be so senseless then what does that say about life itself? So Billy creates a vast and fantastic dream world, wherein he finds answers and peace; after all, there was no contentment for him in love, work, or faith, where most Americans find meaning. And that is the key to what Vonnegut is really getting at. Most of the people have a spouse they don't detest, or a job they enjoy, or at least a faith in a caring God. But what happens to the Billy Pilgrims of the world, faced with their own existential crisis and possessing no easy answers? How do they cope?.

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