

The Violence of Warfare and Traumatic Experiences in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract

Slaughterhouse-Five is Kurt Vonnegut's breakthrough novel that was published in 1969. It is based on his own Second World War experience in Dresden. It is, in general, an anti-war book and is primarily concerned with free will and warfare. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to demonstrate the violence of warfare and traumatic experience, and the main focus is on Billy and Vonnegut. In conclusion, Vonnegut's incapability to live an everyday life is under the effect of the violence, massacres, and traumatic experience that he has seen in the Second World War. The traumatic experience Billy has seen on the battlefield is mainly reflected in his hallucination to view past and future. They have made him think that there is no difference between being alive or dead, because those who died have been rescued from their bad memories of warfare, but he dies a hundred times in his life. Vonnegut wants to confirm that wars destroyed humanity physically, mentally, and psychologically since in addition to the millions of killed and injured people in the massacres of the battlefield, even the survivals have psychologically become dead with terrible and merciless views of the memories of warfare.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Violence of War, Traumatic Experience

Introduction

The twentieth century is seen as one of the great centuries in history regarding getting and reaching a significant development step in scientific, financial, and technological growth. Despite all developments that humanity got, the century was not lacking in troubles and catastrophes since several wars took place during this century, like the two World Wars, especially the Second World War and the Vietnam War. The wars led to degrading and dehumanizing humanity into a lower position. The wars resulted in so many massacres, which caused the death of millions of people, including children and innocent civilian people. In addition to having millions of deaths, the wars had a terrible

impact on the survivors since they had seen so many traumatic events during warfare. After ending the wars, they suffered from the traumatic events they witnessed, which had a destructive impact on their entire lives to the death.

Literature has always had a significant role in depicting what has happened throughout history. Therefore, the violence of war has become a dominant feature in literary genres like poetry, short stories, dramas, and novels. Especially in the twentieth century, the widespread use of war literature epitomizes that very fact. The wars and their awful impacts on the people's lives led the writers to dramatize the violence, traumatic incidents, destruction, massacres, and the victims of the wars in their writings. These have been reflected in the contemporary or later literature (Davis, 2006).

As America has had a main role in most wars during the twentieth century, war became a dominant figure in American literature. Therefore, like the other American novelists, Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* under his life experience during his imprisonment in Dresden in the Second World War by German forces. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is one of the novels that mirror the impact of the violence and traumatic incidents of the Second World War. Even it has been written during the Vietnam War, there are some explicit references to the Vietnam War.

The novel's plot is not coherent. Throughout the story, Vonnegut employs flashbacks and flash-forwards. Readers are unable to predict the plot's commencement correctly. The first portion discusses the problems of writing the novel, and he starts the plot with chapter two, although we don't know when it begins accurately. "Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and came out another one in 1941. Vonnegut has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 17). He is also very brief and avoids duplication. He does not go into great depth in adding characters into the story. As a result, the readers are more eager to discover what happens next (Allen, 1988).

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Vonnegut is against wars and states that how humanity degraded from their level of humanity, he compares the soldiers to the babies who are ignorant as he states, "you'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 18). If we think of this speech deeply, it is clear that it criticizes the writers who glorify the wars and veterans. It refers to the medieval literature that they praise knights and chivalric, in the last time people fought only for good things, it was not like a modern century. Therefore, we do not see any glamorous thing in this book related to war; it is generally an anti-war novel in general. Here the participants of the war degraded babies, that they are compared to the babies.

Furthermore, McArdle (2015) talks about the logic and wildness of wars. He claims that Vonnegut's explanation of Dresden firebombing "highlight the destructive power of war and the injustice that it causes", because there were no military forces in the city and yet, "the destruction was not any less cruel, and the civilian casualties were not any less tragic" (p. 21). On the other hand, Işık (2016) states that the impact of the events which happened in Dresden "never let him be free from the memoirs. So, he transferred his experiences to Billy Pilgrim" (p. 358). Despite the fact that he exhibits no obvious symptoms, Tang (2011) states that his trauma has already left an ineradicable mark on his heart. Billy, on the other hand, has a mental collapse while incarcerated. It's worth noting that he suffers the breakdown while yelling humorously at Cinderella's performance rather than when experiencing the atrocities of combat bloodshed. (p. 56)

The following speech shows the violence of the war: "The Germans and the dog were engaged in a military operation . . . when reported as news or history, gives many war enthusiasts a sort of post-coital satisfaction" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 66). The Germans and dogs together involved in military operations express the violence of the war and the mercilessness of the people, especially veterans, who are highly excited during a hearing and knowing that there are many corps of their enemies on the battlefield. They become excited as if it is the post-coital satisfaction. You can see how wars degraded human beings to a lower degree, even worse than wild animals. They get interested in taking out the soul of each other. There is another point that refers to the animals; it is clear that human beings who involved the animals in the wars. Wars, which are done under the hand of human beings, will destroy nature and the animals with themselves.

There is another view that shows the violence of wars and the cruelty of the people towards dead bodies. As in the opening chapter, Vonnegut discusses a young soldier who died in a horrific accident. The lady writer questions Vonnegut if the horrific event disturbed him, to which he says, "Heck no," as if she had asked something ridiculous. He also notes that he has "seen lots worse than that in the war," implying that he considers the disaster as something usual (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 7). Even when she asked, it was just for getting information, just like nowadays journalists take pictures of the dead and injured people only to write down something about it and earn money with. Also, it shows the violence of war how it has made the death of the people become something regular since as much as they see the catastrophes of the wars, they have seen worse.

Vonnegut has stated in the *Slaughterhouse-Five* that "One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved . . . There were to be no moon men at all" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 230). Tomedi (2004) states that "Vonnegut's story of young men sent to fight, and the civilians' children among them—killed in the process" (p. 58). It means that the American fighter planes were flying over Dresden, and they were striking the city without caring whether bombarding Germans or Americans, civilians or soldiers, children, women, young

or older people. It was supposed that there was no one to remain alive.

Billy clarifies that the first time he came unstuck in time was in 1941, so it is a long time before his trip to Tralfamadore. When he becomes aware that he is in danger behind the lines of enemies, he makes flash-forward after his death. He then makes flashbacks to a time before death and the previous times during being in trouble when he was about to drown while his father was teaching him swimming (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 38). This shows the reasons behind Billy's being unstuck in time are his overall suffering. On the other hand, Diwany and Khalil (2014) express that Vonnegut uses non-linear structure, which is related to chaos theory, to highlight the effects of postmodern trauma.

The wars made people cruel sometimes towards their friends, "The soldiers' blue eyes were filled with a bleary civilian curiosity as to why one American would try to murder another one so far from home, and why the victim should laugh" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 65). Weary drew back his right foot, aimed a kick at the spine, at the tube which had so many of Billy's important wires in it. Weary was about to break it, but he noticed that there were five German soldiers with a police dog. Therefore, the soldiers were surprised that an American would try to murder someone so far from home. It shows the violence of the wars that have made the people cruel and ruthless towards each other. Sometimes the soldiers who belong to the same troop betray each other. Bly (1985) claims that the writer condemns the mentality that make people commit massacre by portraying the main character Roland Weary.

On the other hand, Al-Ma'ani (2014) says, "Vonnegut tries to reflect the victimized articulation of the experience through the war which caused his trauma" (p. 25). He depicts the victim through Billy Pilgrim. As Billy was weeping without apparent reason, nobody had seen him do so. Nevertheless, only the doctor knew. It was a noiseless thing Billy did. It confirms that Billy is under the effect of the traumatic experience that he has seen in his battlefield life. Moreover, the doctor ordered him to have a nap every day. The doctor wished that this would get rid of a complaint, which Billy had. There is another situation which shows Billy suffers from his traumatic experience and is psychologically affected by the violence of the war. During his sleeping time, he usually kicks, whimpers, and cries which is why no one wants to sleep beside him (Vonnegut, 1991, pp. 78,100).

The calamity of war leaves a major impact on Billy's life after the war. Mustazza (2010) states Billy "returns home safely but emotionally numb"(p. 15). Moreover, Billy is unconcerned about his fate because Weary's buddy, Lorenzo, has sworn to murder Billy because he believes Weary died due to his negligence. Billy is looking forward to his death. As he repeats the statement, he wants to convey to the reader that there may be no difference between the beginning and the finish. "farewell hello" many times, "Billy predicts his death with an hour . . . 'Many years ago,' he said, ' a certain man promised to have me killed" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 103). Vonnegut "deliberately illustrates Billy as a passive and innocent character to show the reader the destruction of war" (Marvin, 202, p.

124). Moreover, they wish to die, not to live and experience such a horrible life.

Time travel is one of the themes of the novel. Billy time travels frequently and encounters aliens in the novel, and Vonnegut explains this as the result of Billy's visit to Tralfamadore planet. Bloom (2009) writes the reader notices that these symptoms show Billy has schizophrenia. Vonnegut shows the brutality of wars and shows explicitly what happens to the survivors of wars.

Conclusion

Kurt Vonnegut has written *Slaughterhouse-Five* on one of the most horrific wars firebombing over a Dresden, eastern German city that resulted in the death of about 130000 civilians. The firebombing was in 1945 in the same year that Tokyo was struck by bombing raids on Hiroshima. The time that the novel was published is essential too, which was 1969, in the same year the United States was in the middle of the depressing of the Vietnam War.

Slaughterhouse-Five indirectly claims to stop any war, as he portraits the reality of the war, even the effects of the wars on veterans, survivors, children, civilians, animals, even nature, the environment, and the atmosphere. Vonnegut in the *Slaughterhouse-five* mocks every idea and philosophy that once have encouraged people and especially American people to enlist their name and participate in American forces to fight for their country. Moreover, he mocks at the idea and the encouragement that makes people brave and at least pretend to be brave to fight for their country and their people.

Vonnegut not only does not praise and not glorify the people and the veterans who took part in the wars but also he degrades them since he compares them to the babies. Baby symbolizes ignorance and stupidity, as he states in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 7). Therefore, what Vonnegut has claimed in *Slaughter-Five* is precisely the opposite of what writers did in the past as writers in medieval literature who glorified the wars and veterans as the knights in their literature, especially poets in their poetry and poems. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut was prophetic in nature as he depicts war as something dangerous, which is contrary to the natural order and every religion, claims, requires, and asks for peace and none violent actions by human beings.

Vonnegut's helplessness and disappointment are reflected in the novel that he cannot change and alter the very bad conditions that humans live in. He lives under the effect of violence and traumatic experience that he has witnessed during the wars and his prison time, which seems they have made him travel through all the periods, whether it is present, past, or future. However, it is very true to say that he travels through his mind and his imagination, not in reality, which is why the only thing he can do is think in fantasy life like Tralfamadore this is just to escape from the terrible reality. It confirms that in addition to the millions of people who were killed during the massacres of the wars, also the survivors of the wars are dead alive. They have too much suffered, therefore they wish to

be dead hundred times not to live in such horrific and terrific life. Since they still suffer from the past traumatic events during the wars and the violence that they have witnessed and Billy is the best example of suffering in a traumatic experience he has witnessed.

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