

When one begins to analyze a military novel it is important to first look at the historical context in which the book was written. On the nights of February 13-14 in 1944 the city of Dresden, Germany was subjected to one of the worst air attacks in the history of man. By the end of the bombing 135,000 to 250,000 people had been killed by the combined forces of the United States and the United Kingdom. Dresden was different than Berlin or many of the other military targets which were attacked during World War II because it was never fortified or used for strategic purposes and, therefore, was not considered a military target. Because of its apparent safety, thousands of refugees from all over Europe converged on Dresden for protection (Klinkowitz 2-3). Dresden's neutrality was broken and the resulting attacks laid waste, what Vonnegut called, "the Florence of the Elbe." Kurt Vonnegut was a witness to this event and because of fate, had been spared. He wrote *Slaughterhouse Five* to answer the question that resounded through his head long after the bombs could no longer be heard. "Why me?"- a frequent question asked by survivors of war.

Vonnegut was tormented by this question and through Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in *Slaughterhouse Five*, he attempts to reconcile the guilt which one feels when one is randomly saved from death, while one's friends and loved ones perish. Billy Pilgrim's own life was spared, but was never able to live with himself knowing that so many others had died. The feelings of guilt which emerged from his having survived the bombing of Dresden and from Billy's fortunate escape from death under the shelter of the fifth Slaughterhouse haunted Billy through much of his life. Billy Pilgrim did not consider his survival a blessing, but a curse. A curse to be forced to live on with the guilt of survival. Billy Pilgrim faced such tremendous guilt, that he spent his entire life after Dresden trying to alleviate himself of it. His guilt is in many ways comparable to the guilt felt by the survivors of the Holocaust. Many Holocaust survivors had to face their own "Why me?" question. However, many Holocaust survivors were able to reconcile their feelings of guilt or put it out of their minds. This solution was never viable for Billy Pilgrim. Billy's guilt made life so unbearable that he could no longer live with himself and he rejected the life that had been granted to him. There was no answer to Billy's question because war is not logical, nor is it just. Never could one give a justification for the fortuitous slaughtering of the innocent, which claimed the lives of Dresden's inhabitants. This idea is exemplified in the secondary title *Slaughterhouse Five* is known by, *The Children's Crusade*. *The Children's Crusade* was one of the many Christian "Holy" Wars which aimed on destroying the Muslim people. *The Children's Crusade* was really a ploy by entrepreneurs to sell Christian children into slavery. Thousands of children were killed on ships en-route to the slave market and many others were sold, never to be seen again. Vonnegut gives the Children's "Crusade" as an example of the atrocities and in-humane acts which transpire under the auspices of War. That is why Billy Pilgrim invents a world where a justification can be given, where life and death are meaningless and feelings of guilt disappear. The only way Billy Pilgrim can confront this guilt is to excuse his survival and trivialize the gift of life and the cruelty of death. He creates a new world where he can be free from his guilt. That world is called Tralfamador.

The Tralfamadorian world provided Billy Pilgrim with the escape that he needed from his guilt. The Tralfamadorian people are not locked in a three dimensional realm. They are not locked in the frames of time to which the human world is forced to live in. Tralfamadorians can "shift" through time as seamlessly as humans can walk towards a point. This ability allows them to focus on the pleasant moments in the history of the Universe and ignore the aspects of time they dislike. Thus, the fire-bombing of Dresden is just a tiny frame in the vast space time continuum. The guilt of Billy's being saved is reconciled by eliminating the existence of a past, present, and future. Since any fraction of time is accessible in the Tralfamadorian world death is just a tiny part of existence that is ignored like the fire-bombing of Dresden. Billy Pilgrim reinvents himself and his universe

to gain purpose in his guilt ridden life (Lundquist 82).

The Tralfamadorians are real to Billy because without them he cannot live with himself (Lundquist 82). Billy believes that he was taken by a Tralfamadorian ship to be an exhibit of a human being in a Tralfamadorian Zoo. On Tralfamador, Billy is exposed to an entire new way of thinking which neutralizes the "Why me?" question. In the Tralfamadorian view of the Universe, guilt does not exist because in their view one is not responsible for one's actions. Whatever will, or has happened will always happen and did always happen. There is no way to change the course of events. Everything is predetermined. Billy is told by the Tralfamadores (regarding Tralfamador) that:

Today we do (have peace). On other days we have wars as horrible as  
any you've ever seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do  
about them, so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We  
spend eternity looking at pleasant moments (Vonnegut 101).

The Tralfamadorians even now when and who will destroy the Universe, yet they make no attempt to stop it because in their eyes it cannot be stopped. Billy, by accepting the Tralfamadorian view, frees himself from the guilt which one feels when one is locked in time and responsible for one's actions. Billy Pilgrim grasps the Tralfamadorian philosophy and insists the Tralfamadorian world exists because it eliminates the "Why me?" question. Guilt is a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime wrong ; a feeling of culpability. For example if one steals a hundred dollars, one would feel remorse over that action and wish one had not done it. Under the Tralfamadorian outlook Billy Pilgrim does not have to feel remorse for being saved because that is how it was and always will happen. He does not have to feel guilt or remorse because there is no reason to. There is nothing that can be done about war and death, "they are as easy to stop as glaciers." (Vonnegut 3) The death of all those innocent people could not be stopped, it was predetermined by some unknown force just as the destruction of the Universe, by a Tralfamadorian testing a new fuel, is also predetermined and unstoppable.

Vonnegut uses irony by having Billy Pilgrim an Optometrist, whose job it is to help others see the world more clearly with greater acuity and sensitivity. Billy believes it his job to "prescribe corrective lenses for Earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy believed, because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore." (Vonnegut 25) This is in essence what the Tralfamadorians teach him that the Human view of time is erroneous (Tanner 198). The Tralfamadorians give Billy an analogy of how humans perceive time:

Human vision is something so narrow and restricted...to convey to  
themselves what it must be like they have to imagine a creature  
with a metal sphere around his head who looks down a long, thin  
pipe seeing only a tiny speck at the end. He cannot turn his head  
around and he is strapped to a flatcar on rails which goes in one  
direction (Vonnegut).

Billy by accepting the Tralfamadorian view of the world frees himself from the metal sphere and from his guilt. Much of Billy's guilt rested on his view of time and nature. Before he was introduced to the Tralfamadorian viewpoint he believed in crusading against war and the death of the innocent and felt guilty and upset when another human's life was blindly taken. After coming to newly understand the limits of human vision and the naiveté of human-kind, namely that one can change what will happen and guide one's actions Billy felt no sympathy for death and made no attempt to right injustice and stop the atrocities of war.

Although Billy finds peace in the many positive aspects of the Tralfamadorian mind-set, there also exist many negatives to his new vision. The many aspects of Billy's life which his new vision touch are clearly outlined in Slaughterhouse-Five. For example, whenever there is a tragic death or an entire city is destroyed Billy says what all Tralfamadorians say "so it goes." Billy does not feel remorse

or anger when he hears of the war in Vietnam because it is just a frame in time, which has, is and always will happen. Just as the universe will be destroyed by the Tralfamadorians but no attempt is made to stop it. At one point in the novel Billy sees a war movie in reverse, he describes it as follows:

The formation flew over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored in neatly racks..When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were shipped to factories where operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents...so they would never hurt anybody again. (Vonnegut 64)

Vonnegut uses this imagery to dramatize effectively the cruelty of bombing. Billy's Tralfamadorian view of this war film is an obvious improvement over the forward version. However, with the Tralfamadorian view also comes a heavy price. The cost of this new vision is the human conscience and the concern for life (Tanner 198). The Tralfamadorian view extracts the human conscience, which separates humans from the rest of the animal world. The price for a "guilt free" life is the most precious part of human life, emotions. (Tanner 198)

With the Tralfamadorian view comes another steep price, free will. Billy is told by the Tralfamadorians that free will is a uniquely human belief. (Schatt 82) He is told that war, disease, and even the end of the universe is all pre-determined, and that nothing he does can change what will happen. The notion of free will is what gives human life meaning. Part of the "spice" of life is the feeling of accomplishment one has when he succeeds or the feeling of sorrow when he fails. These feelings cannot exist when one's actions are not of one's own choice but pre-determined. When all that happens, is decided by an unknown force, failure, triumph and sorrow cannot exist because one is not responsible any longer for bringing about those emotions. This can easily explain why Billy's life is so dreary and depressing. His acceptance of the Tralfamadorian world has freed him from his guilt, but it has also freed him from "living.". On his tombstone it is written "everything was beautiful and nothing hurt." Although this message on the surface would seem perfect, it in reality points to the short-comings of Billy's life. One cannot enjoy life and happiness, if he has no feelings and lacks all remorse. In the end of his life Billy is "unenthusiastic about living, while stoically enduring it, which may be a sign of the accidie which settles on a man with an atrophied conscience." (Tanner 199) Billy pilgrim has full knowledge, of who, when and where he will be murdered, yet he does nothing about it. While this could be looked at as an acceptance of the Tralfamadorian way of life, it also points to the fact that Billy does not want to stop it because life offers him nothing. The price of for Billy's release from guilt, was Billy's release from humanity.

Slaughterhouse-Five clearly expresses Vonnegut's terrible outrage at the catastrophic fire-bombing of Dresden. But it does more than that. It's underlying theme is not just against the atrocities of Dresden but against all War. Vonnegut's unorthodox stylistic approach which lacks any sequential path, draws the reader deeper into the Tralfamadorian world. Although Vonnegut's character was able to reconcile his life to some extent, Vonnegut was not. Vonnegut was never able to answer his own "Why me?" but in truth a broader question exists "Why any of us?"

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