

A look at billy pilgrim's mental state



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In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* we are taken through the strange life of a Mr. Billy Pilgrim. The story revolves primarily around Billy's time in Germany during WWII but also several other points in Billy's life. What the reader will immediately notice is the strange ordering of events in the novel which is quickly explained as an effect of Billy Pilgrim becoming "unstuck in time". This may very well be the first indication [MK1] that something is not exactly right with our protagonist and as we read on one may notice similarly alarming indicators such as Billy's seemingly hopeless outlook on life[MK2], his inability to discuss death, and his later abduction by the aliens he calls Tralfmadorians. It does not take long to come to the conclusion that Billy suffers from some sort of mental illness, possibly attributed to the war.

Upon further analysis of the novel and a psychiatric look at Billy's mental state some claim that Billy suffers from an acute form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. This position is argued by writer Susanne Veegulani in her article "Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatrist Approach to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*" In which she states "...criteria for the diagnosis of PTSD help to explain and summarize the different facets of Billy's state of mind in the novel". She argues that the trauma of witnessing the bombing of Dresden and being held captive as prisoner of war has led Billy to develop a tumultuous mental state of internal suffering. His perceived invention of the planet of Tralfmadore and his adoption of their philosophy all point to his inability to cope with the trauma he feels as a result of the war. Many other prominent psychiatrists and psychologists as well as literary scholars have come to agree with this diagnosis.

Perhaps the possibility that Billy suffers from some sort of PTSD like affliction is rather obvious when one is familiar with the condition. However what are not exactly obvious are the causes and effects of his condition whatever it may be. Although many scholars, like Susanne Veas-Gulani, would suggest that Billy's condition is a direct result of his part in the war others would argue that his trauma began much earlier in life. Writer Kevin Brown attributes much of Billy's mental and emotional problems to aspects of his childhood. He cites two specific scenes from the novel, firstly the scene where Billy's father throws him into the deep end of the pool in an attempt to teach him to swim and secondly when his father brings him to the edge of the Grand Canyon. Both of these moments highlight somewhat traumatic experiences for Billy specifically the pool incident which he states " was like an execution". Perhaps even more damaging than these isolated events is the very nature of his relationship with his parents. Throughout the novel we are given glimpses of his parents but nothing extensive. Brown argues that despite this limited look at Billy's parents there is " no portrayal of family affection at all" and nearly every mention of them is something negative. [MK3] It is this lack of relationship and meaningful connection with people, even important people such as his parents that creates the sense of unhindered isolation that permeates throughout Billy's life. As Brown points out " Because Billy does not receive the love he needs as a child, he loses the desire to survive, even before the war." Billy's perceived lost desire to live as a child is on display when Billy is drowning at the bottom of the pool his father has just thrown him into and " resented" the fact that someone had come to save him[MK4] . If we can understand his early hardships we are more inclined to wholly understand Billy Pilgrim and his mental condition.

The evident lack of love and meaningful connections continues throughout the rest of Billy's life. This includes his relationship with his wife Valencia, his children, and his fellow soldiers during WWII. Billy is truly alone throughout the entirety of his life and it is this isolation and loneliness could be argued is Billy's true mental affliction. [MK5] Although it is interesting to note that there are really no intimate relationships between any of the characters in the entire novel and this could suggest Vonnegut was intentionally drawing to light this feeling of alienation and lack of relationship in a post-war era as personified through Billy but echoed in others. [MK6] Regardless Billy regards his relationship with his wife as "at least bearable all the way" highlighting his lack of emotion that stems from his lack of connection. Similarly in the war he is considered nothing but an outcast who has no place in a war zone. When looking at these facts it [MK7] seems to suggest that his witnessing of the destruction of Dresden and his time in the prison camp are not the sole cause of his eventual insanity, but rather are complimentary [MK8] .

After the war Billy finds himself in a place of emotional disparity that he refuses to acknowledge. There is one moment however when even he cannot deny his emotional void and that is when the quartet is singing on his wedding day. [MK9] He becomes quite emotional and begins to cry because he has either consciously or subconsciously becomes aware of this incredible alienation and it is shortly after this moment when he begins to tell his tale of Tralfamadore. It would seem that the planet is an invented place that Billy created to cope with the insurmountable weight of his emotional suffering. [MK10] As Brown states " Billy creates the idyllic, Eden-like setting of

Tralfamadore, not merely as a means to escape the reality of the horrors he witnessed in the war, but also to create a place where he is loved by those around him, where he no longer feels alone.” It is a world in which he is in control and knows exactly what to do, vastly different from his experience on Earth. He creates the character of Montana Wildhack to mimic the loving relationships and meaningful connections [MK11] he has missed out on all his life. It is no wonder that Billy would much rather live in this world. He also adopts the Tralfmadorian philosophy a philosophy in which death is only temporary, a convenient way of thinking that allows Billy to deny the reality of death and the effects on his life. This is shown [MK12] when he does not mourn the death of his parents or his wife. He does not want to face the sad reality of his life and his alienation and that is why Tralfmadore is the perfect solution [MK13]. In any case it is the realization of these reasons for the creation of Tralfmadore that truly paint a vivid picture of the character Billy Pilgrim. Similarly they force the reader to face the fact that his mental health problems began far before the start of the war and extended far beyond the end of it and it is this fact that is almost equally as sad as the war itself.

Works Cited

Brown, Kevin. “ The Psychiatrists Were Right: Anomic Alienation in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five.” South Central Review 28. 2 (2011): 101-09. Web.

Vees-Gulani, Susanne. “ Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five.” ResearchGate. N. p., n. d. Web. 04 Mar. 2015.

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