

Trauma's unveiling



Trauma is a tricky thing. It hurts people deeply, and then tricks them into believing they have forgotten about it or have overcome it. It nests deep within a person's soul, perched between fragile emotions and memories, contaminating its surroundings until its effects manifest in the person it has taken hold of; these effects often have the ability to alter a person's mind as means of creating an escape into a more stress-free reality. For Billy Pilgrim of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the manifestation of his trauma lies in his belief that he was abducted by aliens—Tralfamadorians, in particular—and has time traveled through all the events of his life. Vonnegut leaves it to the reader to decide whether Billy has really experienced all he says he did. However, careful analysis shows that Billy Pilgrim has created this story as a way to cope with the horrors as an American soldier during World War II and his early childhood traumas. Even so, he creates an unorthodox view of life within this fantasy, in which every moment is predestined and has already occurred. No matter how much Billy Pilgrim would certainly want to have been kidnapped by aliens and given a more “enlightened” outlook as an escape, he was simply not abducted. The real abduction occurred within his mind, when his trauma took the reins and produced a reality-defying escape.

Billy's need for an escape from plaguing traumas becomes evident when he begins to merge his war experiences with his difficult early childhood memories. He recalls a childhood memory at the Ilium Y. M. C. A., in which his father was “going to throw Billy into the deep end, and Billy was going to damn well swim” (Vonnegut 55). Billy says this felt like “an execution” and later merges this traumatic memory with one as a prisoner of war; he

describes the showers they were forced to take in the camps and the “white-tiled wall” in them—similar to the white-tiled walls of a Y. M. C. A.—to connect the serious stress he was under in both occasions (Vonnegut 55, 107). On another occasion, Billy describes the fear he felt at twelve years old when visiting the Carlsbad Caverns on a family trip; he explains how he was “praying to God to get him out of there before the ceiling fell in” (Vonnegut 113). When the lights went out and they were in total darkness, Billy said he “didn’t even know whether he was alive or not”. This is meant to mirror the existential questions Billy would ask himself at such a lifeless place during war: “where had he come from, and where should he go now?” (Vonnegut 158). The physical total darkness of the caverns reflects the dark reality of war, in which prisoners lose hope and feel their life slipping through their fingers. Billy’s childhood traumas and war traumas amalgamate into an incessant pain that eats away at Billy. Ultimately, he finds his own way of coping—an escape to the twisted, made-up reality of “Tralfamadore”.

To go from seeing violence, hunger, and desperation as prisoner of war to a normal life back in the U. S. was not something Billy Pilgrim could easily transition into. The horrors had been ingrained in his mind and an “escape” to Tralfamadore seemed much more tempting than to confront those demons. The similarities are evident, nonetheless, between the war and life on Tralfamadore. When Billy is captured by German soldiers, he is placed on a cold, packed train for days with other prisoners in which the Germans communicated with them through a ventilator. This mirrors Billy’s abduction by the Tralfamadoreans, when he is “hailed into the airlock” of the saucer, in which there are “two peepholes inside the airlock—with yellow eyes

pressed to them" (Vonnegut 96). The impersonal feel of being watched through a small opening as he is locked away is present in both instances. On another occasion, the German soldiers "found him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War II" after seeing Billy in a tiny, ill-fitting overcoat (Vonnegut 115). Again, this mirrors the way the Tralfamadorians watched Billy and found the human need of explanations strange and almost comical. Billy is essentially normalizing the German soldiers' behaviors by translating them into the Tralfamadorians' behaviors and ways of life. It is easier to imagine a small alien with a different accepted reality treating him as an important specimen of study and enlightening him, than to face the truth of the heinous violence and humiliations against him that belittled and traumatized him at war. By creating this correlation, Billy takes difficult experiences at war and twists them into his own reality on Tralfamadore, as a way to comfort him from the true horrors of war.

Ultimately, what elevates Billy Pilgrim's coping mechanism of Tralfamadore is the Tralfamadorian belief that every moment is predestined and has occurred in the past, present, and future. Vonnegut even reflects this belief in his nonlinear style to further indicate the connection between events that would normally occur at different times; this nonlinear style also acts as a metaphor for the way past traumas of war and childhood jump out at random times and disrupt Billy's mental health. Billy's traumas skip around and stop at the time an American soldier asks a German guard, "Why me?", to which you the German guard responds "Vy you? Vy anybody?" (Vonnegut 116). This is meant to mirror the question Billy asks when he is first abducted—

why me?"—to which the Tralfamadorians simply answer, " Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because the moment simply is" (Vonnegut 97). Billy essentially takes a question associated with a traumatic event, translates it into his own reality on Tralfamadore, and provides a deeper, predestination inspired meaning for comfort. On another occasion, Billy recalls his time as a prisoner of war in which he and all the other captured Americans were forced to shower at the camp. He explains how " there were no faucets they could control" and how " they could only wait for whatever was coming" (Vonnegut 107). The invisible hand working the showers is meant to mirror the invisible hand—essentially God that Billy is alluding to—that controls every moment of existence. This reinforces Billy's accepted idea of the absence of free will. This idea allows Billy to fully cope with his trauma by accepting everything that happened, as he truly trusts the Tralfamadorian belief that all the death and destruction he has witnessed were simply fated to occur.

The truth is, there's no telling how someone will react and subsequently cope with traumatic events. In Billy's case, he created Tralfamadore and found comfort in the escape and enlightenment it provided him with. The traumas of his childhood that were nested deep within him for years, coupled with the later traumas of war that would perch themselves next to them, had come out to wreak havoc within Billy. Tralfamadore was his peace-maker. Although Vonnegut kept the truthfulness of Tralfamadore open-ended, there is no doubt that Billy created it as a coping mechanism. There's no denying the correlation between Billy's traumas and the life he created within Tralfamadore. However, the most unprecedented outcome of his coping lies

in the deep enlightenment he managed to create for himself. He essentially defied all accepted norms of society and its answers to existential questions, and constructed an outlook where he would accept all that occurred simply because it was fated to happen. Of course, the healthfulness of this outlook is questionable, but one thing is for certain: Billy was able to come to terms with trauma. One can only imagine the contentment many humans in the world would find if they could finally put aside their trauma and reach the peace they so ardently search for.