

THE DILEMMA OF TIME IN KURT VONNEGUT'S  
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

Zeki ÖZBİLLİK  
Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi  
Buca Eğitim Fakültesi  
Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü  
Öğretim Görevlisi

Key Words: Slaughterhouse-Five, Black Humour, Science-fiction, War Novel.

ÖZET

Çağdaş Amerikan Edebiyatının kara mizah yazarlarından Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* adlı romanında, günümüz insanının kendi dünyası dışındaki güçlerin elinde nasıl oyuncak olduğunu psikolojik açıdan araştırır. Vonnegut'un İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında Dresden'in bombalanışına tanık olan beceriksiz kahramanı, Billy Pilgrim Amerikan Rüyasının çağdaş uyarlamasında başarısız kalır, çünkü zaman kavramı üzerindeki kontrolünü yitirmiştir. Her ne kadar geriye dönüp Dresden'deki bu korkunç gerçeğe yüzleşmesi gerektiğine inansa da bunu yapmaktan sürekli kaçınır. Bu yüzden, Dresden'de geçirdiği bu yıkıcı deneyimi bilincinde taşırken, zaman ve yer içinde ileri geri savrulur. Vonnegut, hür irade ile determinizm arasındaki çatışmayı yansıtabilmek için arka planda bir yorumcu yaratır. Savaş olayının insanın hür iradesi dışında gelişen bir kader olgusu olduğunu kabullenemediği için, ana temalardan biri olan ölüm olgusu ironik bir boyut kazanır. Ölümün gözardı edilemeyecek kadar önemli olduğuna inanır, ama hem yaşamı hem de ölümü, geçmişle yüzleşebilmek, sevgi ve merhameti sürdürebilmek için, bir savunma mekanizmasıyla gözlemlemenin gerekliliğini de belirtir.

SUMMARY

Kurt Vonnegut, who is a black humourist in modern American literature explores in his novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, from the psychological point of view, how modern man is the plaything of enormous forces. Vonnegut's awkward hero Billy Pilgrim, who has witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden during World War Two, cannot succeed in the modern version of the American Dream because he lacks control over time. Although he feels it necessary to return and confront this disastrous fact, he is reluctant to do so. Thus, he is hurled back and forth through time and space bearing in the center of his consciousness the shocking experience in Dresden. Vonnegut creates a masked narrator to achieve his point in reflecting the

conflict between free will and determinism. He is not content with the excuse of war as a fate beyond the control of human free will, so his major theme death is viewed ironically. He believes that death is too important to ignore, but it is necessary to view both life and death with a defence mechanism so as to be able to face the past and maintain love and compassion.

Kurt Vonnegut, who is a black humourist and major novelist in modern American literature after the sixties, reflects a complexity in his deceptively simple tales. He has always been acutely aware of a Middle-American audience that has little sympathy for "art for art's sake," and the core of his fiction is concerned with the age-old question of free will, the meaning of life and love. In his latest novels, he treats his subject with deadly earnestness, though seemingly he makes use of comic elements. With his consistent use of Jonah and Christ figures in his fiction, he tries plainly to deal with the problem of how human destiny can be reconciled with divine will.

Vonnegut published his significant novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* about his war experience in Dresden, Germany during the Second World War. The book took him twenty years to write, and he explains this in the first chapter of the book as follows:

"I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. ... But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then - not enough of them to make a book, anyway." (Vonnegut, p.2)

Death plays the main role in the plot with no characters and almost no "dramatic confrontations since most of the people in it are so sick that they are the playthings of enormous forces." (Vonnegut, p. 140) The subtitle "The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death" represents Vonnegut's most serious statements about both war and death. Vonnegut himself describes the book on the title page as "a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of the planet Tralfamadore," so the readers are left to observe a series of seemingly unrelated episodes and then to share Vonnegut's view of both war and death.

In the first chapter, Vonnegut describes his efforts to gather information about the fire-bombing Dresden from a "war buddy" who shared the experience with him. During his visit at their house, his friend's wife displays an open dislike towards Vonnegut because she does not like authors who write about war. Upon this, Vonnegut promises her that *Slaughterhouse-Five* will not be another war book with potential roles for John Wayne and Frank Sinatra. By his subtitle "The Children's Crusade," Vonnegut relates all modern warfare to the original Children's Crusade of 1213 when thirty thousand children volunteered to go to Palestine but half of them drowned in shipwrecks while the remaining half were sold as slaves in North Africa. He claims that all wars are fought by the young who usually have no idea about their causes.

Vonnegut's hero is an awkward young chaplain's assistant named Billy Pilgrim who returns from World War Two to Ilium, New York, where he marries the fat, unattractive daughter of a wealthy optometrist. As a result, Billy becomes a wealthy optometrist with two healthy children. However, Billy cannot succeed in his modern version of the American Dream because he is hurled through time and space away from his comfortable surroundings to the desolate German front. He is kidnapped by some

Tralfamadorian robots and taken to the planet Tralfamadore where he is placed in a zoo with the movie star and sex symbol, Montana Wildhack. He learns from the Tralfamadorians that all moments in a person's life exist simultaneously, and the best philosophy is to enjoy the good moments and ignore the bad ones. When he asks them whether there is a cure about the wars on earth, they are puzzled because they know that the universe has been and always will be destroyed by an accident. This time it will be the result of a Tralfamadorian's experiment with a new rocket fuel.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is constructed much like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Although Yossarian in *Catch-22* is compelled to think about his friend Snowden's death, he finds it too painful, and so he is reluctant to do that. In the same way, Billy Pilgrim is forced to return again and again to the fire-bombing Dresden, yet he is always reluctant and tries to avoid the memory. Only when Yossarian and Billy Pilgrim learn to cope with mankind's inhumanity and horrors of war, are they able to describe the atrocities they have repressed. (Schan, p.82) Billy keeps on retreating from the memory of Dresden until he hears a group of optometrists singing. This reminds him of the group of German soldiers who shared the protection of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the American prisoners during the bombing. When Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's archetypal science-fiction prophet and writer observes Billy's strange expression, he asks Billy if he is looking through a time window and observing either the past or the present. Billy denies this because the recall of that past incident represents the climax of Vonnegut's novel, so when Billy is able to face the past, he is also able to return to Dresden and live through the devastation once more. Vonnegut has distorted his memories of the actual fire-bombing of Dresden because he admits that "there was a complete forgetting of what it was like. ... as far as my memory bank was concerned the center had been pulled right of the story." (Standish, p.70)

The critic Wilfred Sheed has pointed out in his essay about the book that "Billy's solution to the problem of the modern world is to invent a heaven out of the 20th century materials, where good technology triumphs over bad technology. His scripture is science-fiction, man's last good fantasy." (Sheed, p.9) Billy Pilgrim is shocked when he observes bombed Dresden, a city with a skyline that was "intricate and voluptuous and enchanted ... like a Sunday school picture of Heaven ... that has been burned by a hellish fire-bombing." (Vonnegut, p.129) Vonnegut resembles this incident to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and interprets the action of Lot's wife as a very human behaviour, and indicates that *Slaughterhouse-Five* does the same thing. It looks back at a disaster with feelings of human compassion and love.

John Keats coined the term "negative capability" to describe the ability of the artist to free himself from his own personality and ego, and to adopt the identity of the character he is writing about. (Bate, p.66) Vonnegut can express no such capability in his novel because there is a parallel between Vonnegut's experience in Dresden and that of Billy Pilgrim, so Vonnegut creates a mask, a narrator who keeps a certain distance between the author and the protagonist. At the end of his first chapter, he introduces a note of science-fiction when he tells his readers that "Somebody was playing with the clocks... The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an earthling I had to believe whatever clocks said - and calendars." (Vonnegut, p.18) Then, he quotes a stanza from Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" which describes how it is possible to "wake to sleep" and "dream by going where I have to go." The key word in the poem for Vonnegut is "sleep," and so the book is, in a way, a vision or a dream. The very process of making this journey is so painful that he has labelled his novel a failure. After the quotation from "The Waking," a masked narrator continues

Vonnegut's story for the next eight chapters with occasional interruptions by Vonnegut himself. This narrator has a Tralfamadorian philosophy of life which makes it painless for him to describe both the fire-bombing of Dresden and Billy's suffering in a cold and objective manner. In this connection, Tralfamadorians, it should be remembered, are machines without human feelings of love and compassion. In the final chapter, Vonnegut appears again and speculates on whether or not he can accept such a view of life.

When an author uses a mask, its reliability may be questionable. In his book, Vonnegut is very careful to distinguish his viewpoint from both Billy Pilgrim's and his narrator's. In the first chapter where Vonnegut is speaking as himself and not using a mask, he explains that he loves Lot's wife for expressing her feelings of love and compassion by turning to look back at the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah even though doing so means being transformed into a pillar of salt. However, the confusing point is that Vonnegut's view of amelioration of the suffering of humanity is not shared consistently either by his narrator or by Billy Pilgrim. For example, one difference in point of view occurs when Billy Pilgrim drives through the Negro slum area of Ilium, New York:

"The people who lived here hated it so much that they had burned down a lot of it a month before. It was all they had, and they'd wrecked it. The neighbourhood reminded Billy of some of the towns he had seen in the war. ... 'Blood brother,' said a message written in pink paint on the side of a shattered grocery store. There was a tap on Billy's car window. A Black man was out there. He wanted to talk about something. The light had changed. Billy did the simplest thing. He drove on. Billy drove through a scene of even greater desolation. It looked like Dresden after it was fire-bombed - like the surface of the moon. The house where Billy had grown up used to be somewhere in what was so empty now. This was urban renewal. A new Ilium Government Center and a Pavilion of the Arts and a Peace Lagoon and high-rise apartment buildings were going up here soon. That was all right with Billy Pilgrim." (Vonnegut, p.51)

The tone of this passage is confusing because the motives of both the narrator and the protagonist are shaded in ambiguity. According to the narrator Billy does the "simplest thing" and drives away when a Negro tries to talk to him. Similarly, the narrator resembles a section of Ilium to Dresden after the bombing, and reports that Billy does not really care whether this urban renewal results in the destruction of his childhood home. It is difficult for the narrator to understand Billy because his motives are quite different. While Billy has a strong desire to forget the painful memory of Dresden and to find a way to reconcile the human suffering he observed there, the narrator adopts the Tralfamadorian philosophy of "ignoring unpleasant times and concentrating on the good ones." (Vonnegut, p.102) He uses the term "so it goes" whenever he describes an unpleasant event, such as the death of Billy's parents or the airplane crash that kills all the passengers except Billy. "So it goes" is a Tralfamadorian expression used by these robots to describe an unpleasant event which cannot be avoided since man and robot both live in a universe in which there is no free will.

While the narrator reports that Billy always turns away from any slight memory of the past, he does not appear to understand the motives behind such an action. Since Billy is a human full of love and compassion, he cannot follow the Tralfamadorian philosophy. He tries to escape when he resembles the sight of a ghetto in Ilium to the memory of Dresden, but on the other hand, he marries a fat woman to alleviate her suffering and loneliness, or he weeps over a mistreated horse. The question that Vonnegut never answers is what young Billy can and cannot change. While the narrator accepts the Tralfamadorian view of the universe

whole heartedly, Billy Pilgrim accepts it intellectually but not emotionally. (Schatt, p.86). His emotional view is closer to Vonnegut himself who also cannot endure human suffering. When Billy sees a group of cripples selling fake magazine subscriptions, he knows that he should call the police, but instead he weeps although he does not understand why. The narrator who also does not understand Billy's weeping declares that "Every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping." (Vonnegut, p.53) Billy is crying in despair for the suffering of mankind even though his intellect refuses to recognize this fact.

Eventually, Billy tries to escape from the sight of human suffering by adopting the Tralfamadorian philosophy. When he meets a boy patient whose father died in Vietnam, he tells him "about his adventures on Tralfamadore," and assures the fatherless boy that his father "is very much alive still in moments that he would see again and again." Then he asks, "Isn't that comforting?" (Vonnegut, p.117) The boy and his mother flee from his office convinced that Billy is insane. However, when Billy realizes that he cannot comfort others, or even ameliorate his own suffering with this philosophy, he tries to pay a price to relieve its pain. When Billy marries his fat wife Valencia, the narrator knows that "Billy didn't want to marry ugly Valencia. She was one of the symptoms of his disease. He knew he was going crazy when he heard himself proposing marriage to her, when he begged her to take the diamond ring and be his companion for life." (Vonnegut, p.93). Billy's disease is his inability to accept human suffering, so during their honeymoon night Valencia tells him, "I'm so happy. ... I never thought anybody would marry me." (Vonnegut, p.103). Billy does not feel any love for her, but he accepts the marriage since he "had already seen a lot of their marriage, thanks to time-travel, knew it was going to be at least bearable all the way." (Vonnegut, p.104)

Billy also tries, as an optometrist, to help people see more clearly, and frequently he feels it his duty to go back to Dresden and live the day of the air-raid. Vonnegut's irony here lies in the fact that had humanity or Billy Pilgrim himself seen the absurdity of their deeds, the suffering could have been alleviated, but they insist to ignore this. Although the narrator can accept the destruction of Dresden with a Tralfamadorian "so it goes," Billy cannot because Vonnegut cannot. The modern novelist is alert to that time sense which runs through all awareness of the relations between fact and meaning, objects and ideas, outward appearance and inner reality; and he tries to make the form of the novel correspond, at least in its technical aspects, to his perception of reality. (Kohler, p.16) The fire-bombing is at the center of Billy's consciousness and is much more real to him than his shallow life as an optometrist in Ilium, New York. Billy is often drawn back to Dresden, but when he is about to confront the actual day of the bombing, he jumps away. When he travels back there, for example, on the night before the actual attack, the narrator reveals that:

"Nothing happened that night. It was the next night that about a hundred and fifty thousand people in Dresden would die. So it goes. Billy dozed in the meat locker. He found himself engaged again, word for word, gesture for gesture, in the argument with his daughter with which this novel began." (Vonnegut, p.142)

His daughter's scolding is less painful for Billy than to endure the fire-bombing once again.

Since Vonnegut has constructed the novel with the fire-bombing of Dresden at its center, all Billy's time-travel and memories are linked to it by repression. Billy's repressed thoughts, however, are part of his stream of consciousness since even in his sleep-like state the devastation is still too painful to face directly. Vonnegut uses this stream of consciousness and interior monologue to show that all Billy's thoughts lead directly to Dresden and to the disturbing yet unanswerable question of why man destroys and kills. Billy

starts one of his time-travels as a prisoner-of-war in Germany about to be given a hot shower in Dresden in 1944. This sensation of hot water causes Billy to go back in time to his infancy. Suddenly he "was a baby who had just been bathed by his mother." In order to powder him, his mother takes him into "a rosy room ... filled with sunshine." This sensation causes him to jump forward in time to a point when he is "a middle-aged optometrist again playing hacker's golf ... on a blazing summer Sunday morning." While he bends down to retrieve his golf ball trapped in the cup, he suddenly travels in time and finds himself trapped by the Tralfamadorians, "strapped to a yellow contour chair ... aboard a flying saucer, which was bound to Tralfamadore." (Vonnegut, p. 73-74)

The logic behind this time shift appears to be associated with the word "trapped." A Tralfamadorian tells Billy that all men and all Tralfamadorians are like bugs trapped in amber, for "Only on earth is there any talk of free will." (Vonnegut, p. 74) Billy's focus is still on man's inhumanity on Dresden fire-bombing when he brings forth the question of human free will, and what he is really asking is that what explanation can man give about his action during the war if man does indeed have free will. Vonnegut's use of a narrator with a personality all his own, his use of stream of consciousness, and his manipulation of the novel's time scheme and aesthetic distance makes the book difficult to follow, but his strong feelings about the Dresden devastation make such techniques necessary. Without such artistic techniques, the novel might have turned into an ordinary story with a melancholy look at war.

In Vonnegut's earlier novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), Eliot Rosewater praises science-fiction writers for their concern with human problems, and singles out Kilgore Trout as America's greatest prophet and science-fiction writer. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim suffers a nervous breakdown and draws Eliot Rosewater as his roommate in the hospital. Billy comes to love Kilgore Trout's novels as much as Eliot Rosewater does because both men "were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science-fiction was a big help." (Vonnegut, p.87) Trout's novels provide a comic commentary on the serious problems facing Billy Pilgrim. *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, for example, is about people whose mental diseases cannot be cured by doctors because the diseases, like Heaven and Hell, existed only in the fourth dimension. Similarly, Billy Pilgrim, as an optometrist, tries to help people see better, but he is labelled insane because he sees Dresden as an example of what war does to victors as well as to losers. A second Trout novel entitled *The Gutless Wanderer* is linked closer to both Billy and Vonnegut, for the book describes a robot with a bad breath who becomes popular after his disease is treated. Without a conscience, the robot drops napalm on people, but nobody complains about that act. They only "found his bad breath unforgivable. But then, he cleared that up and he was welcomed to the human race." (Vonnegut, p.144)

A few pages following this Trout story, Vonnegut quotes passages from David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* in which an officer attempts to justify the fire-bombing as a military necessity. (Irving, 1963) As a contrast to this, Vonnegut's antiwar statements in the first and last chapters, together with Trout's story reflect the myopic morality of all apologists of war. According to Vonnegut, in order to testify the absurdity of war, the climax of the novel is supposed to be the execution of gentle Edgar Derby, a former teacher and in Dresden an American soldier, who has survived all the battles including the Dresden disaster, only to be tried and then shot for taking a teapot from the ruins. In another novel entitled *The Big Barrel*, Trout relates the story of an Earth man and woman who are kidnapped by extraterrestrials and taken to a zoo on a planet called Zirco-22. They are put in a well-furnished house equipped with a news ticker and a telephone that appears to be connected to a brokerage on earth. The extraterrestrials come to watch them

gloating, sulking, or cheering at the prices of stocks on the phony tickertape. The earthlings would realize the absurdity of their actions if they could perceive reality, but they can not. Similarly, like Billy Pilgrim, they have no control over their destinies and are the playthings of fate.

The novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is constructed around two completely opposed points of view which reflect the conflict between free will and determinism. While Vonnegut himself advises his sons to "exercise their free will and do what is morally and ethically justified," his Tralfamadorian robots point out the utter meaninglessness of such human actions. (Vonnegut, p.17) Perhaps the key Trout story in the novel is *The Gospel from Outer Space* in which a visitor from outer space studies Christianity and concludes that Christians are cruel because of their careless and slipshod storytellings in the New Testament. Instead of being merciful, the Gospel actually teaches "Before you kill somebody, make sure he isn't well connected. So it goes." (Vonnegut, p.94) In the flow of the story, Jesus appears to be a poor harmless carpenter, but in reality he is the most powerful being in the universe. The moral of such a story unfortunately becomes not only that "they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time," but also that "There are right people to lynch." (Vonnegut, p.94) According to the Trout story, there should be a new Gospel in which Christ is nobody. Only after he is executed, the heavens open and God reveals that he is "adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full powers and privileges of the son of the creator of the universe throughout all eternity." God then declares that "From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections." (Vonnegut, p.95). Such a Gospel might prevent any children's crusade in the future. Trout recounts in his story that Jesus is a Twelve-year-old son who is learning the trade of carpentry from his father. Father and son gladly accept a contract to build a cross for some Roman soldiers who were to execute a prisoner. The time traveller in the story travels in the future to see if Jesus really died on the cross, and he discovers that Jesus "was dead as a doornail." (Vonnegut, p.176). Trout's stories create a Christianity in which Christ is far more human like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim. Vonnegut and his science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout share a view of a humanistic Christianity, a religion in which human beings love each other.

Vonnegut's protagonist is unable to escape the realities by turning his back to earth. The point is to create a Heaven on earth, but how much can man manage? Vonnegut has a motto on the wall of Billy Pilgrim's office which says:

GOD GRANT ME  
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT  
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,  
COURAGE  
TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,  
AND WISDOM ALWAYS  
TO TELL THE  
DIFFERENCE. (Vonnegut, p.52).

The narrator confesses that "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future," but both in the first and last chapters, Vonnegut is not content "to excuse both the bombing of Dresden and the Vietnam war as a fate beyond the control of human free will." (Vonnegut, p.52) He reveals that he has told his sons that "they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee," and they should not work

"for companies which make massacre machinery." (Vonnegut, p.17). While the novel is about the Dresden air attack and about World War Two, its major focus is on death, and many deaths in the novel are ironic, especially the execution of the unfortunate school teacher Edgar Derby. Vonnegut offers another view of death when he describes the Tralfamadorian view that all moments always exist and death is just one moment in anyone's life. Tralfamadorians enjoy the good moments and ignore the bad ones, but this solution is not satisfactory to Vonnegut who believes that death is too important to ignore. Vonnegut's view of death becomes clear in the final chapter where Billy Pilgrim helps to dig up the bodies buried in the bombed city. When Billy is released from captivity at the end of the war, Vonnegut describes the scene as follows:

"And somewhere in there was springtime. The corpse mines were closed down. The soldiers all left to fight the Russians. In the suburbs, the women and children dug rifle pits. Billy and the rest of his group were locked up in the stable in the suburbs. And then, one morning, they got up to discover that the door was unlocked. The World War Two in Europe was over. Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped. Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, 'Poo-tee-weet?'" (Vonnegut, p. 186)

Billy's world is filled with both life and death. Although it is spring and the trees are leafing out, the coffin-shaped wagon serves as a reminder of death. The last word in the novel is the bird's message to Billy Pilgrim which represents a way of viewing life with a distance necessary to cope with the horrors that both Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater experience. (Olderman, p. 211). It is not indifference, but merely a defence mechanism that allows Vonnegut to smile through his tears and continue to live and to write.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Main Source:

Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr. *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade*. Delacorte Press / Seymour Lawrence, U.S.A., 1977.

##### Secondary Sources

Schatt, Stanley, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Twayne Publishers of G.K.Hall and Co., Boston, 1976.

Irving, David. *The Destruction of Dresden*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

Kohler, Dayton. "Time and the Modern Novel." *College English*, X, October, 1984.

Bate, Walter Jackson, ed. "Negative Capability." *Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964.

Olderman, Raymond. *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.

Sheed, Wilfred. "Requiem to Billy Pilgrim's Progress." *Life*. LXVI, March 21, 1969.

Standish, David. "Playboy Interview: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." *Playboy*, XVIII, July, 1973.