

A Journey to Find a Therapy in the External World: Rereading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Yan Sui¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, China University of Petroleum, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Yan Sui, School of Foreign Languages, China University of Petroleum, Changping, Beijing, 102249, China. Tel: 86-132-4100-2552. E-mail: suiyan7711@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the journey to find a therapy to alleviate his anguish over the traumatizing Dresden experience, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, has resorted to some comforts in the external world. However, both material prosperity and scientific advances prove unsatisfactory to help him since the former can not offer him happiness and the latter only leads to further destruction of the world. By thus portraying Billy Pilgrim the Everyman in his book, Vonnegut exposes a vivid image of post-war Americans who wished to look outward for more choices to achieve their human freedom from their painful memories of the tragedies in the war.

Keywords: therapy, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, prosperity, science, external world

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the moral chaos occasioned by the overwhelming destruction of the World War II which was launched in the name of justice and goodness, Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* which unmercifully exposed the falseness of the ideology concealed behind the glorification of the war. For the writer himself, the writing is “a therapeutic process that allows him to uncover and deal with his trauma” imprinted on him owing to his unpleasant experience in the war (Vees-Gulani, p. 176). For the anti-hero Billy Pilgrim in the novel, his life can also be seen as a journey to find a therapy to alleviate his anguish over the recollection of his war experience. Of all the remedies that are to be offered, the comforts of material prosperity and scientific advances in the external world will be taken into account in the following part.

2. A Brief Literary Review

Since the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it has been thought highly of by both the critic and the reader. As Maurice J. O’Sullivan contends, the book is “the most accessible countercultural event of a confusing year”, that is, 1969 when many of the Americans devoted themselves to creating a better world by showing their suspicion of traditions (244). For William Rodney Allen, this book can be viewed as “a milestone of post-modern American literature” (p. 6). In China, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is also one of the favorite post-modern novels in the academia. In truth, some scholars have conducted impressive research on this representative work of Vonnegut and a study of their essays can prove how their interests are diversified ranging from the language and structure to the ethical significance. For Peng Nana, the writer has skillfully maneuvers the elements of science fiction and creatively represents an absurd world through “its adept use of black humor to lay out its profound theme of absurdity” (p. 273). As for Chen Shidan and Zhang Weiping, *Slaughterhouse-Five* “fictionalized history by using the non-linear historical narrative—a poetic language structure formed by the combination of the diachronic and the simultaneous” (p. 137). Moreover, both of them agrees with Todd F. Davis that the novel conveys Vonnegut’s commitment to “postmodern humanism” with its representation of “the possibilities for the affirmation and creation of new life” in an era of destruction (Davis, p. 36). Another scholar Tang Jiannan regards innocence as “a bittersweet medicine” which seems to comfort a despairing individual and provide a promising future for the society but proves unsatisfactory to the world on the verge of destruction (p. 55). Virtually, Vonnegut’s vision for a more desirable world can be evidenced in his search for a therapy for both the individual and the society.

Unlike the abstract word “innocence”, such concrete therapies as material prosperity and scientific advances are also prescribed by the humanist author Vonnegut, which is to be explored in this essay concerning how the protagonist Billy Pilgrim intends to find some remedies in the outside world after his traumatizing Dresden experience.

3. Remedies in the Outside World

Like the fantasized Tralfamadorian philosophy of time and the ancient myth of innocence, dramatic growth in economy, science and technology gives Billy Pilgrim some hope to forget his past experience and numb his trauma by turning to materialistic possessions and technological conveniences for comfort. As a matter of fact, since the book is “both a product of its times and an astute commentary on them” according to Thomas F. Marvin, Billy is a representative of American people who tried to pull through the aftermath of World War II by repressing their inner anguish and questing for comfort in the outside world (p. 133). As is known, postwar America witnessed the rising prosperity as many other nations were still struggling through the destructive impact of World War II. Until 1950s, America had been a country in a time of complacency. And as the 1960s began, Americans were still filled with hope and optimism. The booming economy is greatly a result of great strides made in American science. Major inventions and discoveries were almost daily events, and previously ignored technology was improved upon and made commercially applicable. Television became the dominant mass media and space exploration was stepped up as part of American dreams. In a sense, economic prosperity and technological advances are interwoven into the novel but they serve more than as the social background. Materialistic affluence and scientific development are viewed as a panacea, which, Americans hope, can cover up the messes in World War II and cure their trauma inflicted by their war experiences. Indeed, this wishful thinking that some outside comforts such as material prosperity and scientific development can help people alleviate their pain over the memory of the past, is vividly represented in the characterization of the anti-hero, Billy Pilgrim.

3.1 Prosperity: An Unsatisfactory Remedy

Prosperity seems a desirable remedy to distract people from their traumatic experience and fill in their inner void with attachment to materialistic values or possessions. However, the rise toward financial affluence is often as doubtful as that of Billy Pilgrim.

After the war, Billy, whose father is only a barber, marries Valencia even though he is reluctant to do so. But he “had been rewarded for marrying a girl nobody in his right mind would have married” for he succeeds in “coming up in the world” as his mother says (119). He is given a new Buick Roadmaster, an all-electric home and made manager of his most prosperous office. His marriage to Valencia is actually a marriage to money.

According to William Rodney Allen, Valencia is “a parody of consumerism” (91). She is described to be “as big as a house” because she is always eating and gives empty promises that she will lose weight for the sake of her husband (107). Symbolically, both her fat body and her gluttonous behavior associate her with materialistic values and possessions. In addition, she is rich. She shines with the glitter of an insured eighteen-hundred-dollar diamond and becomes enraptured at the sight of her wedding anniversary gift—an eight-hundred-dollar sapphire ring with a star in it. By marrying Valencia, Billy becomes “as rich as Croesus” (61). He can enjoy all the pleasures that materialistic success promise: driving his Cadillac El Dorado Coupe de Ville, having a wonderful collection of cufflinks, and much more than that.

However, just as Shang Xiaojin says, “his undesired marriage to Valencia...was in essence one flurried attempt to resist the onset of mental collapse with whatever peace and tranquility that he hoped money could buy” (56). After his unnerving experience in Dresden, he hopes that he can withstand the horrors of war and cover up his secret trauma by marrying into materialistic success. However, his marriage does not heal his trauma but hastens his mental breakdown. He acknowledges that Valencia is “one of the symptoms of his disease” (107). This shows that Valencia does not help him recover from his illness and his proposal to her is only caused by his insanity which he actually hopes that the marriage can cure. But their union proves to be merely “bearable” (120). Valencia seems to be more concerned with her food and Billy simply shuts her out of his own inner world. In the course of their empty and meaningless marriage life, they communicate more out of simple formality than mutual understanding. Thus, the fact that Billy does not love her but still lives with her has a symbolic meaning--materialistic wealth cannot heal Billy's wound but it is definitely around him.

Ironically, Valencia is killed by the poisonous gas in her damaged Cadillac—another symbol of economic prosperity. On her way to the hospital where Billy is treated after the air crash, Valencia has a minor accident when a Mercedes collides into her expensive family car from behind. However, when she arrives at the hospital, she is already unconscious and becomes “heavenly azure” as a result of the poisonous carbon monoxide (183).

This indicates that wealth is not a curative remedy but a self-destructive social disease.

Another example to prove that money is not therapeutic but destructive is manifested in the book allegedly written by Kilgore Trout. The book is about a money tree whose leaves are twenty-one dollar bills, flowers are government bonds, and fruit is diamonds. However, this money tree does not promise happiness. Instead, it arouses people's greed. Human beings scramble shamelessly for the wealth that the money tree is expected to offer, only to end up killing each other around the roots and making "very good fertilizer" (167). This story unfolds an allegorical painting of human beings who are consumed by their own insatiable greed for money. In this way, it reveals that money, or materialistic possession can sometimes be destructive rather than therapeutic to mankind. Even though Billy is not destroyed by his materialistic success, he has to come to terms with the fact that consumerism not only fails to heal his personal wound but also gives rise to all the futility and emptiness in his life. His wish to find a way out in material affluence is as absurd as his failure to find the steering wheel in the back seat of his luxurious car when he is drunk. What is worse, he has to do something to fill the void of his present life, such as recalling the painful memory of his past Dresden experience. This means his materialistic life only makes him more agonized over his past.

In addition, the harsh conditions in the burned-out Illium ghetto indicates that prosperity itself is a complicated issue as it might have brought prosperity toward many people but it also leaves many other, especially the weak, the minority, in the mires of poverty. It does not mean that the blacks are not industrious enough to make a desirable livelihood. Conversely, they have always been slaving at a better existence even after slavery had been abolished. What makes a difference is that they, as blacks, can by no means climb up the social ladder as Billy the white man has done by marrying a wealthy white woman. In another sense, money cannot buy equality for the world. Ironically, neither can it buy a happy and meaningful life for Billy even though he is abundantly rewarded by the marriage. So on the whole, Billy's materially prosperous but spiritually empty life as well as the uneven distribution of wealth demonstrates that prosperity is no replacement for the fundamental values such as freedom, justice and equality (133).

3.2 *Science and Technology: The So-called Panacea*

As we know, scientific advances are an important index of social progress. In another word, scientific progress is so closely associated with social development that the inventions and discoveries of a certain age can be representative of the times. So the narrator comments that "we...saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney, saw what the future would be like, according to General Motors" (p. 18).

Moreover, science is, in reality, closely related with economic growth. As is known, many technological inventions are often a part of people's materialistic life, such as TV and cars. They are so important that some of them even become indispensable. Besides, scientific development and economic growth have an interactive relationship in that they can promote each other. Usually technological progress can contribute to economic growth and in return economic prosperity creates a demand for more sophisticated inventions. Since prosperity can not heal the wound of Vonnegut and the society, neither can science provide Billy with a therapy that can heal his wound. What makes a difference is that the narrator in the book only shows a mild contempt for the former but lashes out at science because it is "the most dangerous 'religion' of all, the belief in unbridled technological progress with its alleged objectivity, which is nothing but amorality, and its built-in tendency toward ultimate self-destruction" (Freese, p. 153).

There is no denying the fact that the book unfolds a positive side of science and illustrates Billy's attempt to relieve his pain by resorting to technological inventions, real and imaginary. When he suffers insomnia, he employs the vibrator *Magical Fingers* in hope that this machine can rock him to sleep. As an optometrist, he can prescribe corrective lenses to people to help them have a clearer vision. With the help of TV, he can watch a backward movie, satisfying his aspiration for regaining the lost innocence. Likewise, he can advocate his Tralfamadorian philosophy over TV and radio and make convenient trips in cars or by airplane. When he is hospitalized after his mental collapse, he finds comfort in reading science fiction which turns out tales of more stunning technological progress. Under the comforting influence of those stories, Billy himself makes the biggest invention in his life—an imaginary planet where extraterrestrials boast a more technologically advanced civilization. They can come to the earth in a spacecraft and kidnap Billy and Montana for a similarly scientific research. They communicate telepathically and talk to Billy by means of a computer. To Vonnegut, Tralfamadore is a technological utopia which is once supposed to be feasible and which, in a way, serves as a cushion against Billy's tremendous pain. If the life of Billy gives a slide of people's enthusiastic and profitable relationship with science and technology, it also shows how such positive attitudes about science and its products begin to waver.

After all, science is only a prospective remedy and its curative effect is rather problematic.

As Peter J. Reed and Marc Leeds have commented, Vonnegut's "expression of the scientific perspective is more often negative reaction than positive exposition" (1996, p. xv). Despite the allure of scientific and technological marvels created in automobiles and TV sets or envisioned in the invention of the highly advanced Tralfamadorian civilization, their failure to heal personal trauma and treat the social disease has called into question faith in their therapeutic prowess. In the first place, technological progress cannot heal Billy's wound. In spite of the help of Magical Fingers, Billy cannot yet overcome his sleeplessness. Though the backward movie offers Billy an illusionary picture of innocence, it can not change the history and thus can not erase the painful memory from his mind. Though Tralfamadorians is highly advanced in technology, they are indifferent to Billy's past trauma and respond to his questions impassively. Therefore, Vonnegut tells people to "stop thinking science can fix anything if you give it a trillion dollars" in a letter which is supposed to be written to Earthlings one century later (*Fates Worse than Death* 112).

In addition, technological progress has a mechanizing effect on mankind. The novel does succeed in portraying what Hartley S. Spatt calls "the image of mechanized humanity" (121). The soldiers are no less than robots with "teeth like piano keys" (64). They are brainless to take orders from the government unconditionally and heartless to kill each other and innocent civilians. This is reflected in another science fiction written by Kilgore Trout, *The Gutless Wonder*. The robots are described to have "no conscience" and drop burning jellied gasoline on human beings (168). This reminds us of those robot-like soldiers who are made to firebomb Dresden, raid Tokyo and blast Hiroshima, etc. As for Billy, he also appears more like a brainless and heartless robot than a flesh-and-blood human being. He has to be "made" to go to bed and stay under the electric blanket until the heat came on (132). He looks and behaves so much like a machine that he seems to be integrated into his world of cars, lenses, TV sets, etc, even in his imaginary world of Tralfamadore where he is provided with all the earthly technological facilities. This machine-like aspect might also explain Billy's nonchalance to the poverty in a black ghetto and the war in Vietnam. Against the critique of his automation, Billy might settle for his lack of "free will" which he has adopted on Tralfamadore. However, this very absence of free will is typical of his machine-like quality because he is, like a robot, unable to make choices, or to be more precise, made to believe that he has no choices in face of private tragedies and public catastrophes.

This is also true of his daughter Barbara. She, like her father, appears like a machine with her legs like "an Edwardian grand piano" (29). The difference is that a machine has to be oiled and she has to be "all doped up" because she is given the pills "so she could continue to function" (188). As for Tralfamadorians, they equate all life with machines. So they think it ironic that the Earthlings believe in "free will" (86). It is on such a technologically advanced planet that Billy and Montana are experimental machines programmed to satisfy the scientifically curious extraterrestrials down to the minute detail of breastfeeding which has been introduced above.

What is most astounding about science is its tendency toward ultimate self-destruction of people. A new look at Billy's backward movie by forwarding it instead, implies that technological inventions and their mass productions as evidenced in bullets, bombs and planes are directly responsible for those perceptible deaths and the intangible pain. The use of modern weapons leads to the death of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in World War II. The firebombs devastated the architecturally artistic city of Dresden and killed over 135,000 innocent civilians. And Vietnam War turned out every day corpses created by military science. As for Hiroshima, the nuclear weapons, the epitome of even more sophisticated technology, resulted in a smaller number of deaths. But this event has the more considerable impact on the world because it is more an experiment to show the mighty power of the atom bombs and forebodes the likelihood of the destruction of the whole earth. This ominous message actually sets in when the Tralfamadorians tell Billy how the world will end, which shows the subtlety of the technological operations since an error on the part of a test pilot can cause the explosion of the whole universe. This ending might only be an apocalyptic fantasy. But it implies that modern technology is destructive enough to lead people to the brink of self-annihilation in form of alarming massacres. So the narrator tells his sons "not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that" (19).

Undoubtedly, such slaughters do not happen every day. But science does generate frequent unsettling deaths on a smaller scale. An elevator operator, a veteran who is not killed in the war, is squashed by the machine he is working on. Those optometrists lose their lives in the air crash except Billy. His wife Valencia is poisoned by carbon monoxide in the family Cadillac which loses the exhaust system in an accident. And Billy himself, according to his own prediction, will be killed by "a high-powered laser gun" (143).

By projecting the worlds of the past and the present as well as imagining a world of the future, Vonnegut reveals that “his vision of technologically advanced societies appears more often dystopian than utopian, and the same seems generally true for his views of such advances in the world around us” (Peter J. Reed et Marc Leeds xv). Despite its highly advanced technology, Tralfamadore is not a pleasant planet if we take into account the fact that people there consider all life as machines without free will and that it will blow up the whole universe someday in the future owing to an error in their scientific experiment. As far as our human world is concerned, it has “become addicted to technology, a codependency that threatens to render Earth itself dysfunctional” (Spatt 119). Therefore, science not only fails to heal the wound of Billy or the narrator and the society, but also is directly responsible for the pain of individuals and the disease of the world.

4. Conclusion

Judging from the above, the economic growth and the scientific advances might have given Americans represented by Billy Pilgrim fervent hope to help them pull through the agonies of the World War II but the failure to heal their personal trauma wound up the 1960s with what Timothy Moy claims “the end of enthusiasm” (305). As an insightful artist, Vonnegut personally does not consider materialistic prosperity and technological development as promising remedies but as a part of the symptoms of the social disease. However, by portraying Billy Pilgrim the Everyman in his book, Vonnegut exposes a vivid image of post-war Americans who wished to look outward for more choices to achieve their human freedom from their painful memories of the tragedies in the war.

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