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Manifestations of Trauma in *Slaughterhouse Five*: A Psychological Study

Abstract: *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel by Kurt Vonnegut that documents the time travel of its protagonist named Billy Pilgrim along with giving a harrowing account of his encounters during the Second World War. *Slaughterhouse Five* has been studied mostly as a science fiction novel whereas it can very easily be read as a novel delineating the perplexed mind of a perplexed protagonist. However, so far this facet of the novel has not been explored extensively. Therefore, the aim of this research paper would be to illuminate the complexities of Billy's intriguing state of mind and to state that the elements of time travelling and encounters with the aliens called the Tralfamadorians are not elements of science fiction but rather the consequence of a troubled veteran experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of gaining first hand experience from the carnage of Dresden. This exploration will be achieved by making a thorough examination of Billy's time travelling, his emotional numbing, and his encounter with the Tralfamadorians and connecting all these to the known symptoms of PTSD. This would be done in order to lay foundation for future studies and explorations of war soldiers turned authors, in the conviction that literature may one day be of some service as a kind of psychological remedy for home coming soldiers, their kith and kins and for society at large.

Discussion

I begin by making an endeavour to understand the extent to which the field of Psychology can help us to comprehend as to how can one eradicate war. It is high time that we start realising as to how important is the restraint that war lays on the progress of human development, and as such conceive a way of defeating this paramount barrier. However, a thoughtful pondering would hint towards its complication and suggest a close comprehension of the intentions, inclinations and feelings of human beings. All this leads one to turn to the domain of Psychology. If for example, a town planner is asked to devise a plan for a particular town, he can answer questions related to the probability, mode and cost of the enterprise but he can't answer the questions related to whether or no the enterprise is worth undertaking. The maximum he can do, is to furnish data regarding the points mentioned above, leaving the decision of the undertaking for others. The field of science is such that it is not within its jurisdiction to pronounce orders regarding any undertaking but to hint out what ought be done if a particular outcome is desired.

However, psychology holds a different position among other sciences, in the sense that, it is concerned with the evaluation of the mind. Psychology as compared to other sciences has two supplementary tasks to perform. In addition to providing the data regarding the means, possibility and cost of undertaking, psychology has two important additional sets of data to supply; the first being related to the resolution that a particular result must be attained and the second being related to the election of the means to do so. It is the call of Psychology to bring to notice the mental elements that may effect the verdict unconsciously. This is an issue on which primary focus has to be put and such issues are commonly overlooked.

The past two decades have come up with a new field of investigation know as psychoanalysis, which has opened doors into those areas of mind that had remained hidden till date, the unconscious mind. The investigation carried out have led to very helpful and valuable

information regarding this emotional and intriguing side of the mind. Investigation into this realm has led to the comprehension that man is a more emotional being than was expected but this is met by very powerful social barriers. The conscious mind that we are all aware of is just the tip of the ice berg the real volcano remains buried underneath. It is in this unconscious region wherein all the throttled, pent up emotions remain. Such emotions are usually irreconcilable with the requirements of the society. Any objectionable chunk of reality that enters into this area of the mind is at once used as a raw material for fabricating some sort of pleasing fantasy. It is shaped into some sort of a wish or burning desire wherein judgement is extensively concocted by these pent up emotions.

In this paper I will make an endeavour to show as to how war has had an adverse effect on the psychological health (both conscious and unconscious) of Billy and try to throw light on the fact that the ostensibly incomprehensible occurrences that take place in the novel start making sense if we analyse Billy from a post-traumatic stress disorder point of view. Moreover, I will try to elucidate as to how the Tralfamadorians act as a means of coping for Billy.

Coming straight away to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD is defined as:

Actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate. (Jones & Wessely, 2005, p. 235)

Some of the fundamental tenets of PTSD as put in *Assessing psychological trauma and PTSD* are:

- (1) Re-experiencing, reliving, or reenacting;
- (2) Avoidance tendencies or psychic numbing;
- (3) Psychobiological changes or physiological reactivity (Wilson & Keane, 2004).

A person must exhibit all the above mentioned symptoms in order to be declared as suffering from PTSD. The first of these manifestations being the re-experiencing of the anguish can be also alluded to as having a flash-back. This occurs when the tragic occurrence becomes engraved in the mind and gets enacted many a time in the behaviour of the victim in myriad ways. The second fundamental characteristics is psychic numbing. This manifestation would incorporate a remarkably decreased appeal in a number of important activities such as sense of aloofness and alienation with regards to others. This in other words, would include disinterestedness in any sort of relationships or intimate proximity with any person around. These signs lead straight away to the last of the core manifestation which includes physiological changes such as the feeling of culpability that is generally labeled to as survivor's guilt (Wilson & Keane, 2004). The survivors begin to question as to why did they remain alive whereas so many could not make it and what can be done about it now. However, PTSD may not always trigger due to a first hand involvement in the traumatic occurrence but may also be occur at times by just observing the traumatic event from a distance. However, the impact is more intense in the first case as is the case of Billy.

Slaughterhouse Five published in 1969, is an unusual novel dealing with the story and experiences of Billy Pilgrim pre, post and during the time of WW II. Even though the narrator is not properly introduced, it can be very easily declared that he is the author's surrogate and coloured by Vonnegut's own involvement in WW II as a foot soldier. This becomes very clear from the very inception of the novel, wherein the narrator says that:

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 (1969: 2).

Slaughterhouse-Five ostensibly manifests itself as having being written in a hotchpotch, illogical manner making the novel very bewildering for the reader and making them wonder as to what is real and what not. This novel in a way can be perceived as a literary rendition of the mental process of someone gone through enormous mental anguish. Holmgren Troy argues that the novel has the same narrative technique which is usually found in literature communicating traumatic occurrences such as “repetition, fragmentation, gaps or ellipses, lack of chronology, and shift of verb tenses” (85-86).

Slaughterhouse-Five recounts the novel as “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore”. This excerpt gives the clue that Billy has been suffering from schizophrenia and that his time travelling and frolics with the aliens are just an outcome of his mental malady. An elaborated survey nonetheless makes it understandable that this is an unduly over simplified notion of Billy’s character. The above mentioned quote does not illustrate Billy’s character, but instead the mode in which the tale is narrated. What I want to put across is that, schizophrenic is an adjective which rather than recounting the character, recounts the tales. Nevertheless, several occurrences that take place in the novel come across as if they could be explicated by ascribing them to schizophrenia, and keeping that in view it would not be out of place to take a closer peep into the signs of the malady and as to how are they connected to Billy.

Taking even a cursory look at Billy does indeed reveal a number of manifestations that are typically found in people ailing from schizophrenia. As per the National Institute of Mental Health (NIH), these signs incorporate losing track of reality, delusion and deficiency of any enjoyment in day to day life. Assuming that Tralfamadoreans do not exist in reality, one can easily conclude that Billy is in indeed loosing track of reality. His recurrent meet with the Tralfamadoreans along with his time travel are evidence of this and can easily fall into the slot of hallucination. Delusions are: “false beliefs that are not part of the person’s culture and do

not change” with the person believing in his or her delusions “even after other people prove that their beliefs are not true or logical” (NIH). Even though Billy’s daughter makes an effort to argue with him about the ridiculousness of his belief in Tralfamadorians, he chooses to remain absolutely rigid in his belief. She tells him, “It’s all crazy. None of it is true! there is no such planet as Tralfamadore” (37). Rather than recognising that his notions would appear unsound and improbable to any logical individual, Billy continues to think that since Tralfamadore is not discernible from the Earth, it is not known to people thus rationalising his completely illogical views. Not even for a jiffy does he interrogates his unnatural encounters, further demonstrating his illusions. The final sign, being the absence of any source of delight in life, is seen throughout the novel in Billy’s absence of feelings and absolute indifference towards everything.

In addition to the trauma that Billy suffered during the war, it becomes absolutely evident from the novel that Billy had undergone a lot of suffering even during his childhood days which sprout from his troubled ties with his parents. In one such incident Billy was tossed deep into the swimming pool by his father. Billy sees this episode as “an execution” as being “numb as his father carried him from the shower to the pool” (55), had then taken him to the rim of the grand canyon” (127). The latter event is something that happened to Billy when he was twelve years old, standing with his parents at the rim of the Grand Canyon. As they stare down the canyon, Billy is terrified that he is going to fall in and die. His mother touches him, and Billy proceeds to wet his pants. These episodes shows Billy as being frightened for his life without having any capability of doing anything about anything. These childhood events had a lasting effect on Billy as a child and as an adult, as as as adult, he relives these incidents many a time. As an adult when Billy is flown into the hospital on complaining that he was going crazy owing to war, the doctors do accept that he was indeed going mad, but refused to acknowledge that it has anything to do with the war. It won’t be out of place to mention here

that even though PTSD was a common mental disarray when the novel was drafted it was not officially recognised until 1980 (GVRL 505). Thus, there was no chance for doctors to detect Billy with PTSD, rather the doctors asserted that “Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep swimming pool when he was a little boy (27).

Kevin Brown observes that Vonnegut by including the comments of the doctors, “may be attacking the psychiatric community of the time that attributed all of one’s problems to one’s childhood and was unable to attribute problems to external factors” (Brown), I do not agree with this assertion. Even though the doctors may not be correct in stating that Billy’s mental disorder doesn’t have anything to do with the torture that he underwent during the war, the consequence of Billy’s childhood events and the kind of relationship he had with his father and mother should never be neglected. From the very beginning of the novel Billy is portrayed as someone feeble and frail manifesting vivid evidences of emotional distress even while the war was going on. However, it was predominantly following the war that he starts to exhibit indications of PTSD.

Experiencing a disturbing occurrence again and again is one of the prime signs of PTSD, and it is something that is experienced again and again by Billy all through the novel, even though in an extremely unusual fashion. The notion of Billy travelling back and forth in time is and the mentioned of death be it of any one is mentioned in a very relaxed manner. No kind of explanation is ever given in the novel regarding it. This time travelling and the encounter with the aliens may lead to interpreting the novel as a science fiction novel, but I would like to differ from the idea that Billy physically voyages back and forth in time, he voyages back and forth in time rather psychologically. Instead I would like to contend that being “unstuck in time” and being compelled to live through the various stages of his life with no actual power over it is a depiction of Billy’s mental disorder and PTSD that he acquired as

a consequence of war. This hypothesis is supported by a number of critics, including J.A. Martino who asserts that:

In response to the horrors of his experience in the war, Billy's weakened mind creates a kind of temporality that denies the linear flow of time, its concomitant Bergsonian freedom, and the inevitability of death" and that "the power of Billy's memories to affectively move him in space and in time is such that it overtakes his conscious thought.

The mental ordeal that Billy undergoes during the war has such an arresting effect on his intellect that he never lives in the present moment but rather regularly keeps experiences the gloomy occurrences of his life. Reiko Nitta (2011) observes that even the narrator does not seem to be satisfied with the fact that Billy is in actuality journeying via time, using the expression "he says" on myriad occasions. Rather than stating confidently that Billy has become unstuck in time, the narrator says that, "he has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between" (56). If one has to believe in that Billy actually voyaged through time, then one has to believe in Billy's own words rather than the words of the narrator, who seems to be cynical. What is more, surprisingly, there is no hint of any character reacting in the book to the so called time travelling and the resultant appearing and disappearing of Billy. This observation is also made by Martino, who states that, "Billy's body does not leave the time and space it occupied before a jump, hence the time travel in which Billy engages must be a purely cerebral experience" (Martino 8). However, Billy does bring up the reason behind the lack of reaction by others, stating that "the Tralfamadorians had taken him through a time warp, so that he could be on Tralfamadore for years, and still be away from Earth for only a microsecond" (32-33). Despite the fact that such an explanation may seem irrational to us, for Billy, it is the only way of making some sense of his life and the kind of experiences he has. Since PTSD as compared to present times wasn't as well established as during Billy's time, Billy's behaviour is an attempt to somehow carve out some kind of a

meaning for himself at the subconsciously level in order to justify the symptoms that he exhibits.

The first mention of Billy becoming unstuck in time is described in the novel as happening on a day when “Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day” (29), and it isn’t surprising that Billy here is older than at any other point of the novel. Even though it is mentioned that it was during WW II that Billy first became unstuck in time while inclining against a tree after while going back to his quarter after the battle was over (54), I would like to contest that this occurrence of time traveling is just as a recalling by Billy it as an aged person. Thus, each and every incident in the novel takes place via the senile, feeble Billy’s remembrance who owing to his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is compelled to experience them again and again. This describes as to how is Billy capable of travelling forward in time, encountering incidents that he would not have experienced yet.

Even though the narrator suggests the random pattern of Billy’s so called time traveling, a close scrutiny of such incidences discloses a clear cut design. Billy never travels randomly between the incidences that take place while the war is going on, all such incidences emulate a linear timeline. Billy who begins as a freshly registered trooper before being taken into custody by the Germans followed by witnessing the carnage of Dresden and finally going back from the war when it comes to a culmination, every single thing takes place in a sequential pattern; something that is alien to Billy’s non war encounters. If one contemplates keenly one notices that even these occurrences aren't as arbitrary as they seem. Reiko Nitta (2011) claims that there is a correlation between the flashbacks and experiences of Billy. Nitta claims that, “the scenes during Billy’s normal days move back and forth in time [...] there is also a pattern: they correspond to Billy’s emotional reaction to his war memories” (8). A keen scrutiny of the situations leads one to conclude that inspite of Billy jumping to and fro in time especially during the non-war epoch of his life, there is definitely a reason behind his destinations.

At one place in the novel when Billy for the first time claims to have travelled time, he is a teenager going to the swimming pool with his father. Being aware that his dad is about to push him into the deep pool in order to give him swimming lessons, Billy the kid feels petrified (55). However he ends up in the pool owing to the fear he feels towards his father. This is familiar to the incident wherein Billy falling behind his men in the army closes his eyes and gives up all hope leans against a tree waiting for what fate had destined for him. Yet at another place when Billy is imprisoned by the Germans and made to sit in the company of other captives he finds that no one of them had anything to share (75). He then shuts his eyes and voyages forward in time, landing in his clinic wherein after examining the patient he falls asleep (73). What is interesting to note in both these incidents, is the extreme sense of apathy and monotony. The clear cut pattern that is present in his time travels is a sign of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But these are not the only signs that he shows. Throughout the book he repeats the expression “So it goes” whenever the death of any one is mentioned, which hints towards the psychological deadening that Billy experiences as a consequence of war. The expression “So it goes” is just another method of reiterating that death is inevitable and that nothing can be done about it. Even though it is an expression which is not just used by Billy, but by the narrator as well, I would like to assert that the expression is used by the narrator in order to facilitate Billy’s opinion. Billy apparently never gets sad or sentimental in face of any untoward calamity or death, in fact he rarely shows any sentimental reaction in the novel. In fact the gap he maintains at the emotional level from the real world can be noticed by concentrating both on his indifference and dispassionate response towards any sort of tragedy or towards his alliance with other individuals in the book.

This condition of Billy’s mind is first brought forth in the second chapter of the novel wherein his daughter is trying hard to convince Billy that all his babble about time travel and Tralfamadorian is insane. In spite of being disappointed with his daughter, he never gets angry

with her or for that matter with any one. He was wonderful that way” (40). This may come across as a very petty observation but it is important keeping in view the foundation stone it sets for Billy’s conduct all through the novel. He only shows one kind of emotional weakness and that is of the shedding of tears. This is absolutely in contrast with the emotionally cold facet of Billy. What is more, he never sheds tears openly in public, which becomes a significant input as it is this fact about him that disconnects his external physical distancing from people and his inner emotional distancing from his internal tempest. It is beyond doubt that the war has given a severe blow both to his emotional and intellectual state of affairs, but in order to maintain a facade of having a normal life he fabricates a kind of shield in the form of emotional coldness in order to protect himself from falling into pieces as he strives hard to get away from any remnant commemoration of the war. Billy thus keeps his feelings pent up deep inside and this is what leads to his weeping.

Even in case of war, he refuses either to speak or show any concern. When his wife Valencia, asks anything about the war, he gives an extremely simple reply. to which his wife responds by saying, “You must have secrets about the war or, not secrets, I guess, but things you don’t want to talk about” (155), to which Billy in turn responds simply by saying, “No” (155). This without doubt, is a lie. He never shares anything about the war with anyone because of him striving continuously to remove that dark period from his memory. Billy is aware that delineating that dark period of his life would lead to his mental breakdown and thus shatter the facade of insensitiveness that he so earnestly desires to work. Billy thus comes across as being shocked by the reality of war. The very fact that Billy is shocked to comprehend the terrible actuality of war stands as a reason behind Billy’s psychological shielding. Billy would forever continue to be mentally tortured and enforced to live again and again in the tormenting memories of war at the subconscious level if not at the conscious level.

Thus, this emotional and psychological deadening rehearsed by Billy and all the victims of trauma becomes an inevitable part of his method of coping up with the trauma. Comparing Billy's insensitivity towards death with the victims of Hiroshima Nagasaki, Veel Gulani describes this reaction as 'psychic numbing' or 'psychic closing off'. Just like the survivors of Hiroshima Nagasaki, Billy conforms such an opinion of death that permits him to remain sane, even if it means becoming emotionally dead. This, as Veel Gulani observes provides him "the possibility to live an outwardly normal life" (178). After suffering great emotional trauma, it becomes quite customary for the victims of trauma not to comprehend completely the incident that lead to trauma. This happens owing to a specific traumatic occurrence evading that section of the mind that would prove to be useful in understanding it. This is in line with Billy's response whenever he is inquired about war. Billy is not only unable but even unwilling to discuss anything about war. Even though witnessing the traumatic event of Dresden has had a tremendous effect on Billy, it continues to remain something that cannot be delineated and evades sense.

Conclusion

The findings of this research paper are that Billy does indeed manifest clear symptoms of Post Traumatic stress Disorder which are caused by the combined effect of the trauma he faced during childhood due to the troubled relationship with his parents and due to witnessing the gruesome events of WW II. These Post Traumatic Stress Disorder gets revealed in Billy's encounter with the aliens called Tralfamadorians and his time travelling which all act as a means of coping up with the shock that he received while serving in the war and witnessing the massacre of Dresden.

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