Slaughterhouse-Five: An analysis of Billy Pilgrim’s Mental Trauma

Slakthus 5: En Analys av Billy Pilgrims Psykiska Trauma

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* focuses on Billy Pilgrim’s travels through time and his experiences during World War II. More than that, it is a story about the journey of a clearly troubled protagonist whose mental state, best described as broken, is never fully explored in the novel. The aim of this essay is to bring light to the intricacies of Billy’s curious mental state, and to explore the theory that the alien encounters as well as the time travelling that he experiences are the result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that Billy suffers from. This is done by analyzing Billy’s experiences with time travel, emotional numbing, and Tralfamadorians and connecting it to known symptoms and causes of PTSD. The results show that Billy does indeed showcase strong signs of PTSD, which were most likely caused by a combination of childhood experiences and trauma during the war. This PTSD manifests itself through Billy’s time travelling and alien encounters, which are used as a coping mechanism.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Kurt Vonneguts *Slakhus 5* fokuserar på Billy Pilgrims resor genom tiden och hans upplevelser under andra världskriget. Ännu mer än det så är det en berättelse om resan av en helt klart besvärad huvudperson vars mentala tillstånd, som bäst kan beskrivas som brutet, aldrig riktigt förklaras i romanen. Syftet med denna uppsats är att skapa en klarhet till förvecklingarna av Billys besynnerliga mentala tillstånd, och att undersöka teorin att utomjordingarna såväl som resorna genom tiden som han upplever är resultat av posttraumatisk stresssyndrom som Billy lider av. Detta utförs genom att analysera Billys upplevelser av tidsresor, emotionellt bedövande och Tralfamadorer och ansluta dem till symtomer och orsaker till PTSD. Resultaten visar att Billy visar tydliga tecken på PTSD, som troligen orsakades av en kombination av barndomsupplevelser och trauma under sin tid som soldat. Denna PTSD maniisterar sig genom Billys tidsresor och möten med utomjordingar, som används som en coping mekanism.
Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance With Death* (commonly referred to as *Slaughterhouse-Five*), published in 1969, tells the story of Billy Pilgrim and his experiences before, during and after World War II. It is, in many regards, a highly unconventional novel. Although the narrator is never properly introduced, it can be safely assumed that he is, if not Vonnegut himself, at the very least a stand-in for the author of the book as it is based on Kurt Vonnegut’s own experiences as a soldier in World War II. This is something that is made apparent from the very beginning of the book, when the narrator states 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” (2). Furthermore, the novel has no linear structure, often skipping back and forth between different periods of Billy’s life with no apparent order. Despite the lack of a conventional timeline and a strong focus on his time during the war, the novel covers a great deal of Billy’s personal life both before and after the war. It is primarily during these parts of Billy’s life that the introductory words of the novel come into play, stating that “all this happened, more or less” (1). Throughout the novel, Billy experiences a series of extraordinary and seemingly paranormal events including aliens and time travel. Unlike the events in the war which are based on Vonnegut’s own experiences, the science-fiction elements of the novel are never fully explained, leaving their validity and meaning open to interpretation. These unexplained elements are what led me to question the mental state of the book’s troubled protagonist, Billy Pilgrim.

The word that best describes Billy is “weak”. Billy is not a strong person, either physically or mentally. He is described in the book as “a funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth – tall and weak” (30), and in many ways he is the exact opposite of how one would imagine the hero of a war novel to be. It is very fitting, then, that Billy is not the hero of this novel and should not be conceived of as such. Rather, Billy is a classic representation of an anti-hero, a term which could be described as a main character in a story that does not have the attributes a conventional hero would have, such as courage and strength. Far from possessing these heroic attributes, Billy is instead a simple, weak and funny-looking man who happens to be drafted into a war he is ill-equipped to be a part of. Even his name, Billy, is a more childish form of the name William and further helps to depict how utterly unheroic this protagonist really is.
This portrayal of Billy is developed further during his time in the army, where he continuously annoys his fellow soldiers with his impotence. He is in constant need of saving and is regularly berated since “it was absolutely necessary that cruelty be used, because Billy wouldn’t do anything to save himself” (43). Billy is well aware of his shortcomings, repeatedly asking the others in his squad to “go on without me” (43). He is described as “cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent” (43), and it is clear that Billy has no motivation to even get out of the war alive. It is not because Billy does not value his life; he simply does not have the mental strength to keep going in extremely stressful situations. Despite this weak-mindedness and despite getting captured and held as a prisoner of war, Billy manages to survive the war, become a successful optometrist and start his own family. It is clear, however, that the war has a lasting effect on him. Billy does not escape the war a stronger man than he was before; he only becomes more damaged, as can be observed through his newfound views on the world as well as his emotional distance from people close to him.

There is no doubt that Billy Pilgrim is an incredibly fascinating and troubled character. Although Slaughterhouse-Five is at its core a story about the horrors of war, I would argue that the novel cannot be fully appreciated without also putting focus on the main character and his mental struggles. In this essay, I will discuss how the war affects Billy Pilgrim on a psychological level, and argue that the seemingly inexplicable events that occur in the novel actually make sense if we grant that Billy is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, I will explain how the Tralfamadorians serve as a coping mechanism for Billy. The ultimate goal is to provide a deeper level of understanding of Billy’s character, and as a result gain a greater comprehension of the novel as a whole.

A multitude of studies and analyses have been made exploring the nature of Billy Pilgrim, many of which I will refer to throughout the essay. Among these are J.A Martino’s article about chronesthesia and duration in Slaughterhouse-Five, in which he discusses the nature of Billy’s time travel. Furthermore, when discussing the logic and pattern of said time travel in the novel, I will be referencing the theories of Reiko Nitta as presented in her study about the psychological techniques used by Vonnegut. When discussing Billy’s trauma, I will be supporting my arguments with Amanda Wicks’ explanation of the ways that great emotional trauma can affect the victim in terms of how they recollect the traumatic event. Moreover, a publication by Josh
Simpson in which he discusses the effect that Kilgore Trout has on Billy will be referenced. In order to explain the link between Billy and the author, I will be looking at Peter Reed’s article published on Vonnegut’s official website which includes information about the life of Vonnegut himself. Similarly, Monica Loeb discusses the relationship between Kurt Vonnegut and the book’s narrator. Perhaps most prominently, I will engage with ideas from Susanne Veel-Gulani who discusses the state of Billy’s emotional turmoil, its effects, and the idea of Tralfamadorians being a tool for Billy to conquer his trauma.

As mentioned, Kurt Vonnegut himself experienced a number of the different events depicted in the novel as a soldier and prisoner of war (POW) during World War II, and in particular the bombing of Dresden. After coming back home, Vonnegut had great difficulties putting his experiences into words. This is made known to the reader in the first chapter of the book, which serves as a kind of preface to the novel and is very clearly autobiographical. The narrator states in a conversation with the wife of his old war buddy, Mary O’Hare, that he “must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away” (19), referring to the book that he decided to write about the war and Dresden bombings. He later states that if he ever does finish it, he intends to call it “The Children’s Crusade”; the original intended name (as well as part of the full title of) for Slaughterhouse-Five (19). In a sense, this book became Vonnegut’s autobiography in the form of a fictional story. Although it is established that Vonnegut is the narrator of the book (160), Monica Loeb argues that there are “two principle narrators in Slaughterhouse-Five: one who is the actual author, Vonnegut himself, and another, impersonal, seemingly omniscient narrator” while further claiming that “one corresponds to the factual side of the story, the other one belongs to the fictional world” (Loeb 7). It is a convincing point that makes sense in the context of the narration, as it shifts from the autobiographical style showcased in the first chapter to the telling of Billy’s fictional story. Furthermore, it is important to note that although Billy Pilgrim is not Vonnegut and Vonnegut is not Billy Pilgrim, they do share traits that suggest that Billy is created in the image of Vonnegut. Vonnegut fought in the same battles, was similarly captured as a POW, and was even born on November 11, 1922 (Reed): the same day as Billy Pilgrim (30). This relationship between Billy and Vonnegut, and the world he has created, is essential to understanding the presence of PTSD in the novel. In this novel, Vonnegut has not simply created a fictional character who suffers from PTSD; he has created a character as
a reflection of himself, going through the same or very similar trauma that Vonnegut went through after the war.

This reflection of Vonnegut’s own experiences is something that is made clear not only by looking at the main character, but also the narration and structure of the novel. On the surface, *Slaughterhouse-Five* appears to be written in a jumbled, often nonsensical way. The novel and its content may be very confusing at times, leaving the reader unsure of what is happening as well as questioning what is real and not. In a way, this book can be seen as a literary representation of the mental process of someone who has experienced great mental trauma; something that will be covered later in the essay. It follows the narrative techniques that Holmgren Troy suggests are common when expressing traumatic memories and experiences in literature, such as “repetition, fragmentation, gaps or ellipses, lack of chronology, and shift of verb tenses” (85-86). Despite the strong link between the author and Billy, this essay will treat *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a work of fiction and thus will not be focusing on the narrator’s trauma or strategies. The narrator as a character is not developed throughout the novel, and thus cannot serve as a proper object of analysis. It may very well be that the narrator is using this book, and as a result Billy, as a strategy to deal with their own trauma, but an analysis of Billy’s character is something that holds more value within the context of the story.

The title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five* describes the novel as “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore”. This quote may give the impression that Billy himself suffers from schizophrenia, and that his antics and experiences with aliens and time travel are simply results of this disease. Upon further analysis, however, it becomes clear that this is an overly simplified view of the nature of Billy’s character. While the word “schizophrenic” does appear in the description of the novel, as previously stated, the word to note in that sentence is “manner”. The quote is not used to describe Billy’s nature, but rather the manner in which the story is told. That is to say, “schizophrenic is an adjective used to describe the stories rather than the character. Still, many of the events that occur may seem as if they could be explained by attributing them to schizophrenia, and for that reason it is useful to take a closer look at the symptoms of the disease and how they relate to Billy.

On the surface, it appears as if Billy does indeed show several symptoms that are common among those suffering from schizophrenia. According to the National Institute of Mental Health
(NIH), these symptoms include losing touch with reality, hallucinations, delusions, and lack of pleasure in everyday life. Presuming that Tralfamadorians do not exist outside of Billy’s own mind, one can come to the conclusion that Billy is in fact losing touch with reality. His repeated time traveling together with his encounters with the alien race are evidence for this, and they may also fall into the hallucination category. Delusions are described as “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). Billy is extremely stubborn about his belief in the Tralfamadorians, even as his daughter tries to reason with him about the absurdity of them. “It’s all crazy. None of it is true!” (37), she says, adding that “there is no such planet as Tralfamadore” (37). Instead of acknowledging that his ideas would seem illogical and unbelievable to any other reasonable person, Billy simply states that the reason no one else knows about Tralfamadore is because it cannot be detected from Earth, thus justifying his views as completely reasonable. Billy never once questions his supernatural experiences, further proving his delusions. The last symptom, a lack of pleasure in everyday life, is another one that Billy demonstrates throughout the book. With the lack of emotion and complete apathy he displays, there is nothing in the novel that seems to bring Billy any actual joy.

Despite these symptoms pointing toward the disease, schizophrenia is not an accurate diagnosis of Billy Pilgrim. Although it could be argued that his visits with the Tralfamadorians are hallucinations, these would be the only case of hallucinations experienced by Billy in the novel, making claims of schizophrenia circumstantial at best. Veel-Gulani is of the same opinion, believing that Billy does not suffer from hallucinations at all but rather that his “fantasies seem more the result of a vivid imagination that he uses as a sense-making tool to deal with his war trauma” (176). Therefore, I would argue that a more suitable diagnosis for Billy is post-traumatic stress disorder.

Before providing the arguments for why Billy is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, it is important to explain what the disease is and what its symptoms really are. The Gale Virtual Reference Library (GVRL) describes PTSD as “a psychological disorder that develops in response to an extremely traumatic event that threatens a person’s safety or life” (505). Those suffering from PTSD may experience a number of different symptoms, one of which is repeatedly “[re-experiencing] the traumatic event vividly in their thoughts, perceptions,
images, or dreams” (GVRL 505). GVRL goes on to state that those re-experiencing these events “may be aware that they are recollecting a previous experience, or they may have hallucinations, delusions, or dissociative flashbacks that make them feel as though the trauma is actually recurring in the present” (GVRL 505). Furthermore, another symptom of PTSD is the “consistent avoidance of people, objects, situations, and other stimuli connected with the event” (GVRL 505), and those suffering from it often “‘shut down’ emotionally and become incapable of expressing certain feelings, especially those associated with affection and intimacy” (GVRL 505). PTSD is not only caused by the direct involvement in a traumatic event, but may also be caused by witnessing such an event. Because of this, veterans who witnessed the horrors of war first-hand are the most likely sufferers of PTSD (GVRL 506). As is the case with Billy Pilgrim, however, this sort of mental trauma is not only caused by traumatic experiences during adulthood.

Along with the trauma suffered during the war, it is abundantly clear that Billy suffers from events that happened during his childhood as well, which more than likely stems from his dysfunctional relationship with his parents. The reader does not get a great deal of insight into the life Billy had as a child, nor do his parents play a large part of the overall story, but the scenes that do involve them show a dysfunctional relationship between Billy and his parents. One of the more obvious instances of this is when young Billy is thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool by his father. Billy experiences the scene as “like an execution” and being “numb as his father carried him from the shower to the pool” (55), implying that Billy is terrified for his life without the power to do anything about it. An event such as this could easily have a lasting effect on a young child, and Billy reliving the event as an adult suggests that this is indeed the case for him. Further evidence of his father’s actions having a lasting effect on Billy comes when he checks himself into a hospital after feeling like he is going crazy after the war. Although the doctors agree that “he was going crazy” (127), they deny that it is as a result of the war. It is worth mentioning that although PTSD was, of course, a real disorder when the novel was written, it was not officially recognized as one until 1980 (GVRL 505). Therefore, there would be no way for the doctors to diagnose Billy with PTSD. Instead, the doctors claim that “Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool when he was a little boy, and had then taken him to the rim of the grand canyon” (127). The latter event is something that happened to Billy when he was 12 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.

While Kevin Brown argues that by including the doctor’s comments, Vonnegut “may be attacking the psychiatric community of the time that attributed all of one’s problems to one’s childhood or that was unable to attribute problems to external factors” (Brown), I would disagree with this claim. Although the doctors are unlikely to be correct in saying that Billy’s mental state has nothing to do with the trauma he suffered during the war, the effect that Billy’s childhood experiences and relationship with his parents should not be ignored. Billy was never a strong person, being pictured as weak and showing clear signs of emotional trauma even during the war when nothing has happened to him yet. It is mainly after the war is over, however, does he start to show symptoms of PTSD.

Re-experiencing a traumatic event is a major symptom of PTSD, and something that Billy experiences repeatedly throughout the novel, although in a highly unconventional manner. Billy is described as having “come unstuck in time” (29), and regularly travels back and forth in time. He cannot decide for himself where or what point in time he will travel to, as he is “spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun” (29). This form of “time travel” is a concept that is introduced at the beginning of the second chapter of the book, at the same time as Billy himself is introduced. The idea of Billy being a time-traveler is introduced and treated very casually; the reader is never given any explanation or reasoning for its presence in the novel. On the surface, this may lead the reader to assume that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is partly a science fiction novel. While this interpretation may seem valid in regards to the time traveling and aliens in the novel, I disagree with the notion that Billy is truly, physically traveling through time. Instead, I would argue that being unstuck in time and being forced to relive different parts of his life with no real control is a representation of Billy constantly re-experiencing certain events due to the mental trauma and PTSD that he developed as a result of the war.

This is a theory that has been supported by a number of different critics, including J.A. Martino who argues 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” (1). Billy, thus seen, is never truly living in the present; the mental trauma that he suffered during the war has taken over Billy’s mind in such a way that he constantly re-experiences these dark moments of his life. Although Billy does relive moments of his life, his time-travel is not in any way physical; it is purely psychological in nature.

As observed by Nitta (2011), not even the narrator seems convinced that Billy is truly traveling through time, using the phrase “he says” on multiple occasions when first describing Billy’s temporal condition (para. 6). Instead of simply claiming that Billy has become unstuck in time as a fact, the narrator states that “he has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. He says” (29). If one were to believe that Billy is, in fact, traveling through time, then one would have to take his own word for it as opposed to that of the narrator, who seems skeptical himself. Furthermore, there is no indication of any character in the novel having any sort of reaction to the allegedly time-traveling Billy suddenly appearing and disappearing before their eyes. This argument is also brought up by Martino, who similarly concludes 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). 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). Although this explanation might seem rational to Billy, it is more likely that this is a way for him to make sense of his experiences. The knowledge of mental illnesses such as PTSD during this time was slim when compared to current times, and thus it would make sense for Billy to subconsciously rationalize the symptoms in a way that makes sense to him.

The first instance of becoming unstuck in time described in *Slaughterhouse-Five* comes on a day when “Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day” (29), and it is no coincidence that Billy here is older than at any other point of the novel. Although it is stated that Billy first became unstuck in time during World War II while leaning against a tree after trying to make his way back to his lines after a battle (54), I would argue that this instance of time travel is simply how Billy remembers it as an old man. Every event in the book therefore takes place in the past, through the memories of the old, senile Billy who due to
his PTSD is forced to relive them. This explains how Billy is supposedly able to travel forwards in time, experiencing events that would not have happened to him yet.

Although the narrator claims that Billy’s alleged time traveling is spastic and random, a closer look at the scenes he arrives at reveal a pattern. Billy never travels sporadically between the events that occurred during the war; these scenes all follow a straight timeline. Billy starts out as a newly enrolled soldier before being captured and held prisoner by the Germans, then witnesses the firebombing of Dresden before ultimately returning from the war. Everything happens in chronological order; something that cannot be said about Billy’s experiences outside the war. Even these events are not, however, as random as they may appear. Reiko Nitta (2011) argues that there is a correspondence between what Billy is experiencing and the flashbacks that he endures as a result of it, stating that although “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” (para. 8). A close look at the circumstances leads to the conclusion that although Billy does jump back and forth in time between the non-war related periods of his life, his destinations do indeed have reasoning behind them.

When Billy claims that he travels in time for the first time, he ends up as a young child with his dad at the swimming pool. Knowing that his father is going to throw him into the deep end of the pool in order to teach him to swim, young Billy is terrified (55). Billy ends up in the swimming pool because of the feelings of fear and helplessness. He is numb, closing his eyes as his father carries him from the shower room to the pool where he will inevitably end up at the bottom. This is similar to the way Billy gives up after falling behind his army mates, leaning against a tree and resigning himself to his fate while again closing his eyes. In the next chapter, Billy is captured by Germans and made to sit on the floor in a cottage with other prisoners of war, none of whom talk or have any stories to tell (70). Billy closes his eyes and travels forward in time, ending up in his optometry office after having fallen asleep while examining a patient (71). In both the cottage and Billy’s office, there is a sense of boredom and tedium. Billy seems to simply be going through the motions as an optometrist, similar to his time in the cottage “thinking whatever there was to think, which was zero” (70). The patterns that are present in his time travel are indicators of Billy’s PTSD, but they are certainly not the only symptom that he displays.
Throughout the novel, the phrase “so it goes” is repeated regularly. It is used every single time a person’s death is mentioned, and may be interpreted as a representation of the emotional numbing that Billy suffers from as a result of the war. “So it goes” is essentially another way of saying that everyone is going to die at some point, and there is no point in dwelling on its inevitability. Although it is a phrase not only used by Billy, but also by the narrator, I argue that it is used by the narrator to illustrate Billy’s point of view. Billy never gets noticeably upset or emotional when dealing with tragedy or the death of another character, and in fact rarely shows any real emotion at all throughout the book. His emotional distancing from the real world can be observed by focusing on both his apathy and emotionless reactions to tragedy and his relationship with other characters in the novel.

Billy’s state of mind is first demonstrated in the second chapter when he is having a conversation with his daughter, who is trying to convince him that all his talk about aliens is crazy. Although clearly frustrated with his daughter, he never gets angry because “Billy’s anger was not going to rise with hers. He never got mad at anything. He was wonderful that way” (37). It may seem a trivial and minor comment, but it sets the tone for Billy’s behavior throughout the rest of the story. Billy is never described as getting angry at anyone, and only shows one type of emotional vulnerability: the weeping.

Billy is described as being under doctor’s orders to take a nap every day in order to “relieve a complaint that Billy had: Every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping” (78). This is highly inconsistent with the emotionally distant side of Billy that the reader is regularly exposed to. Billy never weeps in public, which is an important detail as it separates his outer avoidance and emotional distancing from his inner struggles. The war has clearly done major damage to Billy’s mental and emotional state, but in order to maintain an outwardly normal life he must create a shield of apathy to prevent himself from breaking down as he struggles to escape from the memories of the war. Billy therefore keeps his emotions bottled up inside, and this is the cause of his weeping.

To the outside world, Billy maintains a completely apathetic persona. Even in regards to the war, he seems to either not care or refuse to talk about it. When his wife, Valencia, asks him about the war, Billy only gives her extremely vague and simple answers. “You must have secrets about the war. Or, not secrets, I guess, but things you don’t want to talk about” (155), she says to
Billy, to which he simply responds with “No” (155). This is an obvious lie, but perhaps one not even realized as such by Billy. He never talks to anyone about the war or his experiences because he is in a constant state of mentally trying to block that period from his life since talking about his experiences would surely cause Billy to break down and thus destroy the shield of apathy he so desperately needs to function. This becomes evident in the next line of dialogue, in which Valencia asks if the war was awful. Although simply giving the answer “sometimes” (155), Billy is described as being startled by the truth. The fact that Billy is startled as he realizes how horrible the war actually was is proof of the efficiency of his emotional shielding. Billy is always going to be mentally traumatized and forced to live with (and relive) the memories of the horrors he experienced, but on a subconscious level rather than a conscious one. He knows that the war was awful, but only truly realizes it when Valencia brings it up. This is the reason that Billy is unable to talk about the war, and why it is a lie to say that there are things about the war he does not want to talk about. Doing so would make Billy truly conscious about the horrors that he experienced; something that he cannot allow happening since he needs the avoidance in order to function in the outside world.

This emotional numbing and avoidance that is practiced by Billy is an integral part of his ability to cope with his trauma, as is often the case with victims of emotional trauma. Veel-Gulani compares Billy’s passive reaction to death to those of survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, describing their reactions as “‘psychic numbing’ or ‘psychic closing off’” (Veel-Gulani 178). Just as with the Hiroshima survivors, Billy adapts a new outlook on death that allows him to stay sane, albeit at the cost of seeming emotionless. Avoidance and psychic numbing serve as a protective shield for Billy, and as Veel-Gulani puts it, offers him “the possibility to live an ‘outwardly normal life’” (178). After suffering great emotional trauma, it is common for victims not to fully understand the experience that caused the trauma. This is because of the way that a particularly traumatic event will often bypass the part of the brain of the survivor that would normally help define or interpret it, thus forming an “absence in the mind” (Wicks 329). This is consistent with Billy’s reaction when asked about the atrocity of the war. Not only is Billy unwilling to talk about the war, he is in fact unable to talk about it. The traumatic event “has affect only, not meaning” (Wicks 329), and although the trauma is something that continues to have a profound effect on Billy, it is not something that he is able to explain in words as it eludes meaning.
Further evidence of Billy’s damaged mental state is found in his relationship with other characters in the book, particularly his wife. Billy marries a woman called Valencia, but although Valencia loves Billy, he is not able to reciprocate those feelings. On the contrary, Billy seems to almost resent her. “Billy didn’t want to marry ugly Valencia. She was one of the symptoms of his disease” (137). The disease in this case, although not explicitly stated, is Billy’s inability to feel any real emotions, in this case love. He is well aware that he does not, and will never, love Valencia, but he also knows that he will never be able to love anyone. Billy therefore marries her not out of love, but rather in order to live a comfortable and relatively normal life. Further evidence of Billy’s lack of love for Valencia comes in the second chapter, when Billy cheats on her with another woman, whose name he cannot even remember, at a New Year’s party. After getting drunk and persuading the woman to come with him to the laundry room to take her clothes off, the woman asks Billy what it was he wanted to talk about. It is never explained that Billy had wanted to talk to the woman about anything, but his response is “It’s all right”, because “he honestly thought it was all right” (58). This vague reply seems to indicate that Billy feels no remorse for cheating on his wife, having convinced himself that being unfaithful was okay because of his lack of sympathy toward someone he did not love. It seems as if the only characters that Billy truly seems to be passionate about are the Tralfamadorians.

In a novel so heavily influenced by the real-world experiences of Vonnegut, it seems strange at first to include aliens from the fictional planet of Tralfamadore as a significant plot element to the story. Despite the strong influence from the science fiction genre, however, I would argue that the Tralfamadorians do not make Slaughterhouse-Five a science fiction novel, at least in the traditional sense. Rather than being extraterrestrials from another dimension, the Tralfamadorians are instead a manifestation of Billy’s own troubled mind. There is also evidence pointing toward the fact that this alien race is heavily influenced by the works of Kilgore Trout, a science fiction author whom Billy becomes obsessed with. When viewing the Tralfamadorians as a coping mechanism for Billy rather than an actual, supernatural alien race, their inclusion makes perfect sense in context of the story.

One of the most compelling indications that Billy’s experiences with the Tralfamadorians never happened outside of his own mind comes in chapter 5, with Billy lying in the hospital bed next to Eliot Rosewater, a former infantry captain. He is described as “dealing with similar crises
in similar ways” (128), which points to the fact that Rosewater is suffering from the same post-war disorders as Billy: “They both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war” (128). This veteran, dealing with the same issues as Billy, is the one who introduces him to science fiction novels, and most notably the science fiction author Kilgore Trout. Trout quickly becomes Billy’s favourite author and “science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read” (128). It is based on his books, and in particular *The Big Board*, that Billy creates the Tralfamadorians. This Kilgore Trout novel, which is not mentioned until the very end of the story, features a man who is abducted and put on display in a zoo on an alien planet. This is obviously extremely similar to what Billy experiences, as he is also abducted by an alien race and put in a zoo. Billy also seems to draw on other works of Kilgore Trout, particularly one called *The Gospel from Outer Space*, in which an alien “shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian” makes a study of Christianity. In all likelihood, this is the book from which Billy got the appearance of the Tralfamadorians who are described as being “two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber’s friends” with “a little hand with a green eye in its palm” at the top of the shaft (33). This eccentric appearance is far from what one would expect an alien race to look like, and sounds more like the work of an unsuccessful science fiction writer; a description perfectly fitting Kilgore Trout.

These works by Kilgore Trout help Billy, along with Rosewater, cope with the mental trauma that the war has left them with. As they lie in their hospital beds, “they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe” (128), with science fiction being a big part of that process. Billy, quite literally, re-invents the universe in his own mind in order to incorporate the Tralfamadorians into his own reality. They are a necessary aspect of Billy’s life, an idea supported by Rosewater when he says to a psychiatrist “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (129). Without the Tralfamadorians and their philosophy, Billy would have no reason to keep living.

On the other hand, Trout’s work may have had a profound negative effect on Billy as well. Josh Simpson agrees that the Tralfamadorians are created by Billy as an escape mechanism using Trout’s novel as his influence, further pointing out that although “war psychologically wounds Billy Pilgrim […] the ideas contained in Kilgore Trout’s science fiction novels are,
ultimately, responsible for his complete divorce from reality” (267). It is a point that is important to make, as it highlights the fact that psychological trauma alone is not the cause of Billy’s escape mechanism, but also the influence of Trout’s novels. Tralfamadorians do not appear until after Billy starts reading the works of Trout, and it is doubtful that he would have been able to create such an effective coping mechanism, while at the same time removing himself so thoroughly from reality, without the influence of his favourite author.

With Kilgore Trout’s influence on Billy’s creation of the Tralfamadorian established, it is important to focus on why exactly the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life is so important to Billy. When Billy is first abducted, he asks the Tralfamadorians one question: Why him? The answer that they provide is an example of the view they have on free will: “Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is” (97). The concept of cause and effect is not part of the Tralfamadorian philosophy, as everything is predetermined. There is no reason for Billy being abducted. He is, as the Tralfamadorians would describe it, a “bug trapped in amber […] Trapped in the amber of this moment” (97). When confronted by Billy about their disbelief in free will, Tralfamadorians respond by saying that if they hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings, they “wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will’” (109), explaining that out of the hundreds of planets they are familiar with, Earth is the only one with any talk of free will. Free will is therefore an unnatural concept and Billy accepts this philosophy as fact.

Furthermore, the Tralfamadorian view on life and death is drastically different from that of humans. Billy states that the most important thing he has learned from the Tralfamadorians is that “when a person dies he only appears to die” (34), and that it is silly to mourn a person’s death as they are “still very much alive in the past” (34). Tralfamadorians do not see a person’s life as a straight timeline from point A (birth) to point Z (death). Instead, they see humans as “great millipedes – with babies’ legs at one end and old people’s legs at the other” (110). Since time is not a journey from one point to the other, even though a person is dead they are still alive at another point in time. Humans are not born and then go through a series of events on a linear timeline which will ultimately lead to their definitive death; all these events are happening simultaneously. It is for this reason that Tralfamadorians, and as a result Billy, do not see the purpose in grieving over someone’s death. As he describes it, “All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (34).
This philosophy serves as the foundation of the phrase “so it goes”, which is what Tralfamadorians say in regard to death (34). These new ideas are what helps Billy live with the events he has experienced and suffered through in his life. Veel-Gulani comes to the same conclusion, and suggests that “Tralfamadorian philosophy, which opposes trying to make sense out of occurrences, helps Billy deal with the horrible events and their consequences by reinterpreting their meaning” (179). On one hand, this relates back to the way that Billy is not able to fully understand or interpret the traumatic experiences he suffered through as discussed earlier. Instead of trying to understand why, in particular, the Dresden bombing had to happen and why so many innocent people lost their lives, the Tralfamadorian philosophy tells Billy that there is no “reason” for anything. Instead of attempting to process the fact that a horrible and traumatic event ended the life of tens of thousands of people, Billy is able to view both the event and deaths as inconsequential with his “so it goes” mentality on life and death. Billy is able to, as Veel-Gulani states, “conquer his trauma in a way that enables him to function” (Veel-Gulani, 180). After adopting the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians, Billy is able to escape his PTSD and live an outwardly normal life in which his emotions never get the best of him, save for the aforementioned weeping. In doing this, however, he is resigned to the life of apathy and indifference that has such a profound effect on his relationship with people.

In conclusion, Billy is a clearly troubled individual whose mental state can only be truly understood through careful analysis. Having a more developed view on Billy Pilgrim’s character not only serves to give the reader a more complete understanding of Slaughterhouse-Five, but also explains the parts of the novel that do not quite seem to fit in with the traditional anti-war nature of the story. The time travelling and encounters with the aliens from Tralfamadore no longer stand out as science fiction elements in an otherwise semi-autobiographical book; they are simply a result of Billy’s mental turmoil. Billy does not physically travel through time; he is merely re-experiencing the traumatic events in his own mind. This, together with his emotional shielding and completely apathetic view on life as well as his non-relationship with other characters and his family are strong indicators that Billy is suffering from a severe case of PTSD. As a result, Billy invents an alternative reality with the Tralfamadorians and their philosophy, being strongly influenced by the works of the science fiction author Kilgore Trout with whom Billy has become obsessed. These Tralfamadorians become a coping mechanism for Billy, as they teach him about the nonexistence of free will and the pointlessness of mourning someone’s
death. Although Billy still suffers from the trauma of his war experiences and is forced to relive them repeatedly, the Tralfamadorian philosophy allows him to view them in a way that enables him to function. I would not describe Billy as crazy or insane, nor would I make the claim that he is schizophrenic. Billy Pilgrim is simply a man who has suffered through a tremendous amount of mental trauma and is constantly battling the effects of his PTSD while doing everything he can in order to function in the real world. Ultimately, the only real solution is to create his own universe in which to live.
WORKS CITED


