Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* is a psycho-drama of coping with the post-traumatic stress of war. Vonnegut has used a variety of techniques to try to recreate how he has coped with the atrocities associated with war, and battling repressed memories to accept what he has seen, just to be able to recount it and make sense of a senseless act. Vonnegut does this through the use of a fragmented narrative, the deconstruction of the American dream, the use of time travel as a key motif, and placing himself in the novel.

Vonnegut places himself in the novel, which gives it an authentic feel, where events he witnessed during his life are used. *Slaughterhouse Five* contains the factual tale of the destruction of Dresden during the Second World War, which is a story within a story. Vonnegut introduces the reader to a WW2 veteran who is attempting to recollect his time in the war, and his presence during the bombing of Dresden, and in doing so, write an anti-war story. Billy Pilgrim is the lead character in the narrator's story 'The Children's Crusade', and both characters eerily resemble Vonnegut himself. Both Billy Pilgrim and the author of 'The Children's Crusade' are survivors of WW2 and spent time in Dresden, as did Vonnegut, who served in Europe and was a prisoner of war in Germany in WW2, witnessing the destruction of Dresden. After the war, Vonnegut studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, as did the author of 'The Children's Crusade'.

Lundgwist and Reed both believe that Vonnegut is present in *Slaughterhouse Five*, with Lundgwist stating that Vonnegut reveals himself in *Slaughterhouse Five* and that the "character developed most fully in the novel is Vonnegut himself" (Lundgwist, 1977, p.71, 84). Reed agrees by stating that "Vonnegut has been present in many of the earlier novels [of his] that they have directly or obliquely autobiographical content" (Reed, 1977). Reed also argues that with *Slaughterhouse Five*, "Vonnegut has written the crucial personal experiences out of his system" (Reed, 1977).

The use of time travel allows the novel to shift between fact, fantasy and fiction, which is evident in the way Vonnegut blends real-life events (that he himself has been involved in, or straight from the history books) with the fictional tale of Billy Pilgrim and the fantasy of time travel and life on another planet. Vonnegut sets the scene in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five*, identifying his intention to de-gloryfy war to the children who will one day grow up to be in future wars. "The Children's Crusade" starts in the next chapter, where the reader is introduced to Billy Pilgrim, an optometrist who after being abducted by aliens, learns to travel through time. By mentioning the original Children's Crusade of 1213, where 30, 000 children volunteered to go to Palestine, Vonnegut blends events from history, with Billy's fictional tale. This also highlights the contrast between the serious business of war and the naivete of Billy Pilgrim and the other soldiers (Lundgwist, 1977, pg 78). Half of the children drowned in shipwrecks, whilst the other half were sold as slaves. Schatt suggests that "wars were fought by foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of our childhood" (qtd in Dunstan, 1999).

Billy Pilgrim's time travel can be seen as mental instability which manifests as a result of his war time experiences, and can also be seen to de-gloryfy war to the audience. He uses fantasy as a refuge to escape from his past war memories, which can be seen as a method of detachment or a source of alienation from everyday life, which plays a large part in Vonnegut's novel. Dawley highlights this, arguing that "Vonnegut presents the war experience as one that still goes on, (inside his head). The story is in fragments so the experience of Dresden may be returned to" (Dawley, 1997). Hume supports this idea, stating that "Vonnegut's characters feel inadequate due to the inability to control their portion of the world in everyday ways." She suggests that this is exemplified in Billy's psychic withdrawal while hospitalised after war (Hume, 1998). Life in the zoo for Billy can be seen as his detachment from his war time memories and life in general, hence his alienation from others. Hume states that "the major characters (in *Slaughterhouse-Five*) are surrounded by a chilly space, separating them from other people, and suggests that Billy's time in the zoo may be interpreted as psychotic withdrawal" (Hume, 1998).

Vonnegut uses a fragmented narrative to enable the story to weave, bringing in many different threads. This sets the pace of the story, with Billy Pilgrim's tale of broken life, pre- and post-war, and ultimately death. The story progresses back and forth through events in Billy's life as he travels through time himself, with one event in Billy's memory leading to the switch to an event entirely separate, yet still connected. Schatt suggests that Vonnegut has used a Gestalt approach when writing *Slaughterhouse Five*, where readers observe a series of seemingly unrelated episodes, which allows us to share Vonnegut's views on war and death (Schatt, 1976, p.81). Fusco and Dawley believe that the use of synchronicity and fragmentation (respectively) allows for the connection of separate events in *Slaughterhouse Five*.

This is exemplified in one part of the novel where Billy is given a shower in 1944, Dresden, with the sensation of the water like scalding rain, taking him back to his infancy, and being given a bath by his mother, who then takes him into a room filled with sunshine to powder him. Billy then travels to a blazing summer day playing golf, where he bends down to retrieve his ball which is trapped in the cup, before ending up in the moment where he was trapped by the aliens.

Dawley argues that "Vonnegut uses fragmentation of time, structure and character in order to unify his non-linear narrative" (Dawley, 1997). Fusco states that "synchronicity allows for the inter-weaving of loose threads and unrelated events and objects to give them meaning and relate them to reality" (Fusco, 1999).

An evident example of this is seen in the way Vonnegut uses the image of an owl to give meaning to seemingly unrelated events, whilst relating it back to reality. Lundgwist points to this significance of imagery in the scene where Billy thinks he has heard an owl, which turns out to be the humming of the flying saucer. Lundgwist goes on to explain how Billy has been working with an owl (of some sort) all of his life. On one of his many time trips, Billy finds himself staring into the eyes of a jade green mechanical owl, which is his optometer, an instrument used to detect refractive errors in eyes, which one then used to prescribe corrective lenses. The flying saucer can also be seen as an optometer in the sense it reveals a refractive error in Billy's view of the world, and the Trafamadoreans suggest a prescription; their philosophy on time and moments (Lundgwist, 1977, p.81). The owl is used here to connect separate events throughout the novel, and Billy's life, whilst trying to give them some sort of meaning, in an otherwise chaotic narrative.

It could be argued that Vonnegut uses fragmentation of time as a way of getting over the trauma he experienced in Dresden. The shift of focus in the story, allows Vonnegut to work his way slowly through the experience of Dresden, ensuring when he gets too close to painful memories he can escape from them. Schatt believes that "Slaughterhouse-Five is constructed like Catch 22, in that there is a reluctance to accept or return to memories" (Schatt, 1976, pg 82). The actual bombing of Dresden isn't described until the end of the novel, although events building up to it are weaved into the novel, ending in the ever elusive climax. This could be seen as a point of acceptance for Vonnegut.

Dunstan agrees, stating that "it took Vonnegut twenty years to write [Slaughterhouse Five] as he was torn between his desire to forget Dresden and a passion to reconcile what he saw" (Dunstan, 1980). Vonnegut sets out to write about
his Dresden experience, but the trauma of recollecting the events spurs him to time travel back to moments he feels are more safe or secure. He slowly allows himself to work through his memories (getting closer to the bombing) until he is finally ready to accept or just recount what he has seen. Schatt agrees, stating that "after Billy has faced his past, he is able to return to Dresden and the pain of the memory and an obsession about finding a way to reconcile the human suffering observed there" (Schatt, 1976, p.86). Schatt also argues that "when acceptance/coping occurs both (Billy and Vonnegut), are able to describe the atrocities that have been repressed" (Schatt, 1976, p.86). In the end Vonnegut is able to deal with the horrific memories relating to World War 2 and the Dresden bombing, which Schatt argues is reflected in the term “poo-tee-weet,” which is used at the beginning of the novel (when the end is revealed) and again in the closing paragraph of the novel. Schatt believes that poo-tee-weet 'represents a 'cosmic cool' which is a way of viewing life with the distance necessary to cope with the horror of war. It is like a defense mechanism allowing Billy to smile through his tears and to continue to love and write" (Schatt, 1976, p.96). Dunstan supports this, stating that "in Slaughterhouse-Five we witness a moment of balance in Vonnegut’s life when he finds himself capable of dealing with the immense pain of his Dresden experience and ready to go on with the business of living" (Dunstan, 1999).

Schatt sees the role of the aliens in Vonnegut's novel to "serve as comic relief in much the same way as Shakespeare's clowns; relief from the 'heavy' stuff" (Shatt, 1976, p.90). In a similar fashion as the fragmented narrative, Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorians to bring some relief from the seriousness of the war, and allows him to escape (even momentarily) from the painful memories. It is on the night of his daughter's wedding that Billy is abducted by aliens. He is then housed in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore where he is observed by the small green aliens. It is the Tralfamadorians who teach Billy about time travel and seeing in four dimensions, the fourth being time. The act of writing is also illustrated in the novel with the explanation of the Tralfamadorians' books. Similar to their theory of time, the novels are made up of clumps of symbols, that when read simultaneously, reveal a marvellous moment all at once (Lundgwist, 1977). Evans argues that the narrative devices (fragmentation) Vonnegut uses in Slaughterhouse Five produce a similar effect to those in the Tralfamadorians' novels. He states that "like the Tralfamadorian model of the novel, one may clearly read 'each clump of symbols' all at once without there being any initial relationship among them, save that in retrospect one can see how the moment is structured in the whole image of life" (Evans, 1994). When the entire novel has been read, and all the fragments (symbols) seen, it is like viewing a finished jigsaw, in that finally all the pieces fit together to reveal a magnificent image. Lundgwist argues that "Billy and the narrator's time tripping produces a similar effect, in that many moments are seen at one" (Lundgwist, 1977). However, it is not a marvellous moment seen, as Dawley suggests that it is "important to see Billy's whole life so that there are no illusions of a happy ending" (Dawley, 1997).

Writing is as much a part of this novel as the story itself. Both Vonnegut and the author of "The Children's Crusade" are trying to deal with the trauma they faced in Dresden, by making sense (of a senseless act) in writing it down on paper. Lundgwist supports this view, arguing that "Slaughterhouse-Five is (thus) as much a novel about writing novels as it is an account of Billy Pilgrim and Dresden. In relating the difficulty he has in dealing with Dresden, Vonnegut prefaches Slaughterhouse Five with an account of his own pilgrimage though time as he tried to write about his Dresden experience" (Lundgwist, 1977 pg 74-75).

Billy learns quite a lot during his time in the zoo on the planet Tralfamadore. It seems appropriate they choose Billy as a person to teach such a lesson to, because as an optometrist, it is Billy's job to help people see better. The aliens are opening the eyes of the person who enables sight to others to new experiences and a different way of viewing life. Pilgrim learns that all moments, past, present and future is "so always existed and always will. This gives Billy the opportunity to relive different moments in his life throughout the novel. Dawley believes this "brings the events that comprise Billy's life closer together" (Dawley, 1997). He also believes it allows "the bombing to be kept fresh in the mind of the reader, giving them a first hand account of massacre, and at the same time, gain some distance from it" (Dawley, 1997).

The phrase "so it goes" is used throughout the novel, at times when death is mentioned, which can be seen as a false detachment from death or the grief process. Through the use of this quote, Vonnegut denies death its role as a basic form of human condition (Schatt, 1976, p.95). Billy learns this phrase from the aliens during his time in the zoo on planet Tralfamadore, as a result of their ability to see time as a fourth dimension. However, Vonnegut dismisses the Tralfamadorian philosophy, believing that death is far too important to ignore, yet is nothing to fear (Schatt, 1976 p.95; Dunstan, 1999). Vonnegut himself states that "to fear either life or death, to be immobilised by fright or horror or grief, means to give up living and become a pillar of salt" (Dunstan, 1999). In the end, Billy is able to look back through his life, face the horrific events in his past and continue living.

The de-construction of the American dream is used to de-glorify war in Slaughterhouse Five. Billy is viewed as an idiot, who seems to fall into success, rather than work hard to succeed in anything. The humiliation of the American soldiers by the Germans (Billy Pilgrim in particular) can also be seen to deconstruct the American dream. Pilgrim is given an inappropriately small coat, and with no boots. He steals a pair of silver boots that were used in a play of Cinderella, depicting a very strange and extremely ridiculous soldier. Schatt suggests that the absurdity of war is also illustrated in the execution of Edgar Derby, for stealing a teapot from the ruins, after surviving the bombing of Dresden (Schatt, 1976, p.90). It is well known that Slaughterhouse Five is an anti-war novel and it has been argued that "Vonnegut's novel does repudiate most of the stereotyped characters and patriotic bilge that has become standard movie fare" (Schatt, 1976, p.94). Vonnegut himself admits that his novel is "so short and jangled because there is nothing intelligent to say about massacre" (Dunstan, 1999).

Through its non-linear and split narrative focus, the novel is at times a mess, and seems difficult to read. However, Vonnegut has conveyed a sense of dealing with repressed memories from a traumatic experience that any reader should be able to identify with, through his use of the mentioned techniques. Lundgwist states that "the story goes around and around, yet still leads somewhere, and yet the end is very close to the beginning" (Lundgwist, 1977). Because the ending is very close to the beginning, there are no illusions of a happy ending. Although the reader is taken around and around the story of Billy Pilgrim's life, through his past, present and future, in the back of our mind's we know that all is not going to end well. Billy Pilgrim will inevitably die, and we know that and Billy knows that. Perhaps the only sign of a happy ending is that Vonnegut has been able to find a resolution within himself, in his ability to finally accept the past. Just like the memories one may possess after experiencing a traumatic event (as being at war); they continue to be played out in their head, going around and around, and although a resolution may be in sight, it may be no closer to the end than the beginning.

References:

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