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On the Other Side of Madness:

How to Become a Character in Kurt Vonnegut's World

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Abstract
Resumen

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> *"There are almost no characters in this story and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the lifeless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters"*
>
> (Vonnegut 164).

Josephine Hendin asserts that "passivity, acceptance, resignation, and denial" are the only means of survival in the nihilistic landscape of Kurt Vonnegut's fictional universe (as cited in *Sanity Plea* 8). Hendin is not alone in this assertion; many other critics, such as David Goldsmith and Tom Hearron, also label Vonnegut as a fatalist, and one can easily see how such a conclusion could be drawn. Vonnegut himself has confessed that he uses his writing as a psychotherapeutic vehicle to sort out his various mental idiosyncrasies,[1] and the fatalistic element is undeniably present throughout the Vonnegut library. Labeling Vonnegut as a fatalist, however, focuses too heavily on, or is too distracted by, the "more audible and visible nihilistic voice" of his prose while failing to take into account many of the underlying themes that permeate his work (*Sanity Plea* 10). One of the most telling revelations about Vonnegut's true philosophy is his dramatic

and deliberate distinction between people[2] and characters, particularly in his most widely recognized novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which Billy Pilgrim's failure to become a character directly illustrates Vonnegut's philosophy about human nature and in so doing, directly refutes that Vonnegut is in any way a fatalist.

There are only two characters in Kurt Vonnegut's acclaimed "anti-war" novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.[3] The first is Kilgore Trout, the unsuccessful but stubbornly prolific and almost disturbingly prophetic science fiction writer who pops up unshaven, and usually bitterly unemployed, throughout the Vonnegut universe. The other is not Billy Pilgrim. In fact, for an author whose primary concern is the human condition, Vonnegut's novels invariably contain a startling lack of characters. That is not to say he does not write about people. To be sure, his stories are quite overpopulated by human figures, but characters are scarce in his world.

"People," according to Vonnegut, are barely human automatons, going through the motions of life without actually giving thought or consideration to their actions. They are "lifeless playthings," slaves who do not resist the "enormous forces" controlling their lives. Even if they recognize that they are being controlled, they do nothing to change their situation, but resignedly subscribe themselves to their collective fate. "Characters" are people who choose to exercise their free will. This seems a simple enough task; yet for the "lifeless playthings" of Vonnegut's universe it's a rather daunting undertaking. Access to "free will," that is exercising the ability to make decisions and choices concerning one's own life, is purposely blocked by the strong arm of the "enormous forces" of the world. Those "enormous forces" are the institutions of war and religion, which are commodities designed to prevent—even deny—access to free will and

therefore inhibit the emergence of the self. They offer an escape from the bleak landscape of Vonnegut's world, which they created in the first place, and falsely "promise relief from the painful complexity of human identity and the anguish of choice" (*Sanity Plea* 9).

Essentially, Vonnegut believes that people are generally dissatisfied with the human condition. This problem stems from a collective need to reach outward, ever outward, in order to discover some grand meaning of life, rather than explore the depths of the internal dimensions of the individual. This outward quest, orchestrated and perpetuated by the institutions of war and religion, distracts the focus from the self, and therefore from free will and character-hood, and leads not to the answers so greedily and desperately sought, but rather to the complete mechanization, and therefore dehumanization, of Vonnegut's mankind. "They pretend to like it some," says Vonnegut, "to smile at strangers, and to get up each morning in order to survive, in order to somehow get through it" (as cited in Musil 232). People simply go through the motions of life without trying, without thinking, without questioning, and consequently "become the ready slaves of whatever anonymous bureaucracies, computers, or authoritarian institutions take hold of their minds" (*Sanity Plea* 91).

Every Vonnegut novel is peopled with such slaves, with persons who passively submit their will to various authorities, all of which intentionally inhibit—even prohibit—internal reflection. The "enormous forces" of the world have dominated and victimized people so completely that free will, many critics have asserted, does not—even cannot—exist in Vonnegut's world. Consequently none of the people in his novels can be blamed for any of their actions, thus rendering life nothing more than a bleak and

vicious circle of victimhood. Tom Hearron observes that in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "humans are so much at the mercy of more powerful forces that the concept of choice—of free will—does not enter in" (189). People have become in many ways little more than automatons shuffling blindly, emptily, meaninglessly, through life, unaware of their own individuality and of any real truth that may exist. But the situation is not as simple, nor so nihilistic, as Hearron suggests; it is not the case that free will simply "does not enter in." There is a deliberate element of agency and intention involved here: free will is actually denied entrance, and the agencies of denial are those very "powerful forces" that control society. That is not to say, however, that free will cannot ever "enter in." In fact, in Vonnegut's universe free will is always present and always accessible, and the ability to become a character is ever lingering on the fringes of consciousness; the tragedy to Vonnegut is that most people choose not to acknowledge it. In order to gain access to free will, and thus become characters, people must not only recognize but also resist these "enormous forces."

The war-saturated world of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is certainly no exception to this tragedy, and the narrative voice tells us this explicitly, saying, "there are almost no characters in this story and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the lifeless playthings of enormous forces" (Vonnegut 164). World War II is the most overt of those "enormous forces," and is certainly central to the erosion of Billy Pilgrim's sense of self and desire to grant entrance to free will. But other forces are simultaneously at work, insidiously whittling away Billy's humanity as he is carried along by the "patriotic madness that makes war gladly," which is carried away by the "bizarre quest for God and the spiritual salvation through material acquisitions and

technological advance" as well as "self-serving religions that believe in pure good or evil" (*Sanity Plea* 4).

Billy Pilgrim is a particularly poor sort of candidate for the programming of war, "which shapes and controls our proclivities for hating and killing" and turns people into mindless machines "who act violently in the quest of…artificial and arbitrary lusts" ("Pilgrim's Progress" 150). Billy's glaring deficits as a soldier illustrate the extreme absurdity of war: he obviously does not belong in the military; he is never appropriately armed or garbed for combat and, rather than exhibiting proper military stoicism, he is described as being "*bleakly* ready for death" (Vonnegut 33, italics mine). His military occupation as chaplain's assistant only serves to enhance the "preposterous" nature of his status as a soldier: "He was a valet to a preacher, expected no promotions or medals, bore no arms, and had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid" (30). His position automatically opens him up to ridicule from his fellow soldiers. The very position of chaplain's assistant is an empty one, as the soldiers clearly neither respond to, nor truly desire the sort of spiritual inspiration Billy's peddling. His "meek faith" renders him useless in the position anyway, even if it were significant to the troops; he is simply going through the motions, without any true awareness of or connection to his inner self. He "trie[s] hard to care" but the effort is half-hearted at best, and there is no true motivation to question the "enormous forces" directing his life (57).

Billy carries with him various travel-sized manifestations of his manufactured faith, including a small, waterproof organ and a "portable altar" that was "lined with crimson plush" and in which was "nestled…an anodized aluminum cross and a Bible" (Vonnegut 31). The narrator makes a distinct point to mention that, "the altar and the

organ were made by a vacuum-cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey—and said so" (ibid). Religion here is a product, manufactured in the same factory that makes vacuum cleaners, which suggests that these religious articles are assembled with the same level of spiritual profundity that goes into the making of a vacuum cleaner. There is nothing divinely Christian connected to these religious items, and Billy's "meek faith" certainly does little to enhance their spiritual power for either him or the troops; they are nothing more than products that are mass-produced to be bought and sold in the marketplace of a capitalist society. Billy, like the other inhabitants of the Vonnegut universe, allows himself to be herded along by the "enormous forces" on a fruitless quest for the meaning of life. Religion has become a commodity that offers Billy the illusion that he is serving a purpose, and that perhaps his facsimile of a life has meaning. He has no desire to seek out free will because he believes his mercantile spirituality will provide him with the answers to the mysteries of life.

Billy recalls a related incident from his childhood, in which his mother, who never belonged to any church, developed "a terrific hankering for a crucifix," believing that she could purchase spiritual depth as easily as she would a box of tissues (Vonnegut 39). She subsequently went out and purchased one from a gift store, because, as the narrator remarks, "like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (ibid). The reduction of religious articles to mere gift shop items calls any potential spiritual significance into question and suggests instead a new meaning: that everything can be bought, even spirituality—and implicitly salvation itself—and everything has a price.

The people inhabiting the world of *Slaughterhouse-Five* mindlessly go through the motions and participate in this commodified religion because they (half-heartedly) believe it will lead them to the answers, to the meaning of life. Similarly, they participate unthinkingly in the machinery of war. Even the proper soldiers are largely disconnected from the brutality of warfare, even while they are so entirely immersed in it. While mechanically participating in a religious service in the field, an umpire[4] reported to the troop that they were all in fact reported to be deceased: "The umpire had comical news. The congregation had been theoretically spotted from the air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. The theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty noontime meal" (Vonnegut 31). They are so unattached to the situation, and to their own humanity, that they do not think for a moment they are truly in danger. Nothing seems real. All is theoretical because there is no depth, no understanding, and no personal involvement. These people are not characters; they are little more than machines or puppets going through the motions of life without understanding what life actually means, and what it means to be human.

It is while Billy Pilgrim is immersed in this surreal warscape that his psyche begins to drown and he becomes "unstuck" in time. "The shock of war," Lawrence Broer remarks, "has clearly crippled Billy's ability to lead any kind of normal life—to love or believe in people, work, society, or God and has led consequently to withdrawal from human contact into a world of bizarre fantasy" ("Pilgrim's Progress" 144). The dehumanizing institution of war drives Billy inward into a psychological confrontation with a curious "alien" species called the Tralfamadorians. These tangerine orange aliens subscribe to a fatalistic philosophy in which "every creature and plant in the universe is a

machine" (Vonnegut 140). Billy's Tralfamadorian guide likens the experience of life to being "trapped in amber" like an insect, and insists that there is no meaning, "there is no *why*," waiting to be discovered (77).

This fatalist philosophy completely removes all accountability from culpable hands, and annihilates free will. The Tralfamadorian guide admits as much when he tells Billy, "If I hadn't spent so much time studying Earthlings, I wouldn't have any idea what was meant by 'free will.' I've visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (Vonnegut 86). But Vonnegut is very careful to assert that on Earth free will does exist; it is just rarely exercised, especially on the Earth of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim has so long been a "lifeless plaything" of the "powerful forces" of the world that it is no wonder he can so easily give in to the blameless embrace of fatalism. He has been "caged in a zoo, turned into a puppet for the entertainment of mechanical creatures…and seduced into renouncing whatever vestige of free will he has left" by the mechanical aliens in his mind, just as he has been similarly manipulated by so many of the powerful forces of the physical world of Earth ("Pilgrim's Progress" 145). Consequently, he relinquishes his self to a wholesale conversion to Tralfamadorian philosophy, and in so doing "has simply abdicated his humanity, trading his dignity and integrity for an illusion of comfort and security" (ibid). If everything in his life is beyond his control, Billy is no longer responsible for anything that happens to him or those around him, and that is certainly a secure place to be.

Through his Tralfamadorian fantasies, Billy demonstrates that he is at least subconsciously aware that he is being used by inhuman forces for some meaningless end;

but this awareness is not enough to save him from his own apathy. After the war Billy finds himself back home in a surreal and materialistic America, "surrounded by the soulless junk of middle-class suburbia and saddled with an inane wife" who was "one of the symptoms of his disease" (*Sanity Plea* 93; Vonnegut 107). He sets up an optometry business, understanding that "frames are where the money is," joins a local Lions Club, and periodically stays in the mental ward of the veteran's hospital, but through it all, "never does come to any real awareness of the blindness and moral emptiness of his life" (Vonnegut 24; Wymer 49). His overwhelming sense of helplessness, and hopelessness, coupled with the residual guilt from his experiences in the war, feed his need to embrace and endorse fatalism. His acceptance that there is no free will simply eases his own sense of guilt and internal suffering, but also perpetuates his further dehumanization in Vonnegut's eyes.

Tom Hearron believes that, "Vonnegut's view on human depravity…moves into the notion that although humans are capable of doing great harm to others, they are ultimately too much victims themselves to be held accountable for the disasters which they inflict on others" (187). But while Vonnegut's human figures are content with dismissing their culpability, he certainly does not toss aside their accountability so easily. Vonnegut sees fatalism as a coping mechanism that allows a person to slip blissfully, thoughtlessly, into the mindless routine of daily existence. In other words, it allows for wholesale buying into the system through passive participation, thus dismissing free will and any hope of becoming a character. Vonnegut clearly does not do so himself, and though he has said that he uses his writing as a means of sorting out his mental difficulties, he is particularly careful in *Slaughterhouse-Five* above any other novel to

intentionally separate himself from his protagonist. The book is peppered with small assertions of Vonnegut's narrative persona: "I was there," "that was I. That was me. That was the author of this book," and he specifically tells us at different points in the story that he and Billy Pilgrim are two separate personas (Vonnegut 67, 125). Through Billy he is illustrating the tragic aftermath of war on the individual psyche, and how fatalism is one of the easiest ways to deal with the guilt and helplessness, but he is very carefully not connecting himself with Billy Pilgrim. Unlike Billy, Vonnegut does care, and he says as much himself:

> Probably the most curious thing, in retrospect, is that I think that I'm the only person who gives a damn that Dresden was bombed, because I have found no Germans to mourn the city, no Englishmen. I have run into flyers…who were in on the raid. They were rather sheepish about it, and they weren't proud of it. But I have found no one who is sorry (as cited in Musil 231).

Vonnegut cares, he "gives a damn," but he has observed that many others do not, and he posits, through Billy, that this is because their guilt is so overwhelming that they necessarily must shut it out, or justify it, in order to survive. On some level Billy understands that his acceptance of fatalism is a way to hide from his guilt, or to justify his insensitivity to the brutality of war, and this conflict torments Billy Pilgrim throughout the whole of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, sending him to mental wards and eventually over the edge and into madness. Vonnegut does not embrace fatalism, and he is very careful to separate himself from Billy, who clearly, helplessly, does.

Further proof that Vonnegut does believe in free will lies in the fact that, although Billy Pilgrim does not truly become a character in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, someone else in

the book does. Edgar Derby, "the doomed high school teacher," was a prisoner of war along with Billy Pilgrim (and Vonnegut's narrative persona) in Dresden, and he is the only person to become a character in the entire book (*Slaughterhouse* 164).[5] Glenn Meeter observes that, "[*Slaughterhouse-Five*'s] most telling remark concerning Vonnegut's own fiction occurs in the eighth chapter, when [. . .] Edgar Derby 'becomes a character'—that is, exerts his free will by making a speech against an American traitor" (211). Derby "lumbered to his feet in what was probably the finest moment in his life" and proceeded down the road to character-hood when he is the only American soldier in the room to answer the taunts of American Nazi traitor, Howard W. Campbell, Jr.[6] (*Slaughterhouse* 164). The most profound element of Derby's speech lies in his reference to free will; he accuses Campbell of being a snake, but then immediately recants the insult because "snakes couldn't help being snakes" and Campbell "*could* help being what he was" (ibid). Derby, more than anyone else in the book, recognizes that free will does exist. He exercises it himself by standing up to Campbell, and he sees that Campbell at least possesses the free will to act as he does.

Becoming a character is not without its perils, however, and those few who finally reach character status are punished severely at the collective hands of society. This punishment ranges from exile and social rejection to death by public execution and is central to the quest of becoming a character. Derby's arrival at character-hood is tempered by the fact that he is executed by firing squad shortly afterward for stealing a teapot from the post-bombing ruins of Dresden. Time and again Vonnegut emphasizes the force of the controlling institutions of society, and he is sure to point out that the perils of becoming a character, of going against the machinery of society, are great

indeed. Near the beginning of the book, he describes the case of Slovik, a soldier who was executed by his own troop:

> He has directly challenged the authority of the government, and future discipline depends upon a resolute reply to this challenge. If the death penalty is ever to be imposed for desertion, it should be imposed in this case, not as a punitive measure nor as retribution, but to maintain that discipline upon which alone an army can succeed against the enemy.
>
> (Vonnegut 45)

Slovik "directly challenged the authority" of that institution and in so doing exerted free will and became a character. His death was necessary in order to "maintain that discipline upon which alone an army can succeed against an army;" in other words, to reinforce and further establish the power of the controlling institution, and dissuade others from following Slovik's example. Similarly, the narrator recalls that after the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife was instructed not to look back at the ruins of the cities; she was not supposed to feel remorse or regret for the deaths of so many people. "But she *did* look back…so she was turned into a pillar of salt" (Vonnegut 22). She exerted her free will, going against explicit instructions of one of the "enormous forces," and was subsequently punished for her disobedience. While Derby's death is not overtly linked to his becoming a character, it is certainly significant that Derby, specifically, was punished. Every soldier and ever POW plundered the landscape of destruction that was Dresden. Only Derby was executed.

There is a marked lack of this social punishment in the later years of Billy Pilgrim's life, after he makes public his acquaintance with the Tralfamadorians. Rather

than being ostracized, he becomes a celebrity. The other people in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just as eager as Billy to embrace fatalism, and so they lionize Billy as a spokesperson for them all. The fact that he claims contact with aliens is secondary to what he is really offering them, for he voices a philosophy that gloriously eliminates any sense of guilt or responsibility from the public. True, he is assassinated, but that is unconnected from his beliefs and his inability to exercise his free will. The public does not assassinate him, after all; a violent grudge-bearing sociopath from the war does.

Vonnegut paints a rather bleak picture. If becoming a character is so perilous, why would anyone ever wish to do so? What is the point, if only suffering and even death are the waiting rewards? What do Derby and the ever-present Kilgore Trout *learn* from becoming characters? They clearly are not immediately granted access to the meaning of life, which is, of course, part of Vonnegut's point. The outward quest for the meaning of life, pushed by the "enormous forces" of society, is a fruitless one; Vonnegut is not a fatalist; he does not resign himself to the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore unalterable. On the other hand, he is a pessimist. He never promises a happy ending, and the world he depicts is so dominated by the "enormous forces" of society that the gloom clearly seems to overshadow the light. Becoming a character, though, is perhaps the most fulfilling quest any person can undertake, if only because it allows a person to truly understand—perhaps for the first time—what it truly means to be *human*. Lot's wife turned around, she looked back, she becomes a pillar of salt, "and I love her for that, because it was so *human*," declares Vonnegut (22, italics mine). When Edgar Derby stands up to Howard Campbell and exerts his free will to become a character, it was "probably the finest moment in his life," and that is something Billy

Pilgrim never had. There is no true humanity in fatalism, in denying culpability, in buying into the system and allowing oneself to be swept along like so many other "lifeless plaything[s] of enormous forces."

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut recalls a conversation he had with a friend who was involved in making movies. When he told this friend that he was writing an anti-war book, his friend bluntly asks, "Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?" (8, italics his). Vonnegut explains this question by remarking that, "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too" (ibid). But in spite of this, he does write an anti-war book. He looks back, even though it may not do anyone any good, and it is this act of looking back that makes him a character in his own right. It is this act of looking back, of becoming that pillar of salt, which separates Vonnegut from Billy Pilgrim's hopeless fatalism.

Notes

[1] "I have always thought of myself as an over-reactor, a person who makes a questionable living with his mental diseases," says Vonnegut. "Writers get a nice break in one way, at least: they can treat their mental illnesses ever day" (as cited in *Sanity Plea* 12)

[2] The term "people" is used here to generically represent fictional human figures; this is the terminology employed by Vonnegut himself in the opening quote of this paper—he specifically distinguishes a difference between "people" and "characters."

[3] Arguably, there could be a third "character" in Eliot Rosewater, who Billy Pilgrim meets during his stay in the mental ward of the veterans' hospital. Rosewater is certainly a character (as defined in the following discussion) in Vonnegut's earlier work, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. However, when Billy encounters him in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he is still in the experimental process of *becoming* a character. So I suppose, more accurately there are 2.5 characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The opening sentence, however, seems much less complicated as it stands in its minor imprecision.

[4] Vonnegut tells us that umpires were "men who said who was winning or losing the theoretical battle, who was alive and who was dead" (31).

[5] Kilgore Trout does not "become" a character; he simply is one from the start. None of Vonnegut's books to date discuss just how it was Trout became a character in the first place, but he is most consistently the character with whom Vonnegut identifies throughout the Vonnegut library.

[6] Campbell, incidentally, becomes a character in Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, in which Campbell is the protagonist and is accused of being a traitor; his status as such is questionable, since he was an American spy on the Nazi front, promoting nazism through various media—he was so convincing and inspirational with his nazi propaganda, however, that his true allegiance is called into question.

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