

Innocence: A Bittersweet Medicine in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Jiannan Tang

Department of Foreign Languages, China University of Petroleum

Changping, Beijing, 102249, China

E-mail: tjinnan@hotmail.com

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Abstract

In his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut embarks on a journey toward healing since people are suffering from the traumatic war experience and the society is diseased with violence, injustice, and poverty. Of all the remedies, innocence is a bittersweet medicine to comfort a seriously-ill individual and provide an impossibly beautiful future for the society. Though the world of innocence has been destroyed and reconstructing it on an extraterrestrial planet becomes problematic, an attempt in regaining innocence is significant in that it is part of Vonnegut's struggles to heal the world.

Keywords: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Healing, Innocence

1. Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut Jr., rose to considerable fame with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969. However, the author was not flattered by the shower of favorable criticism and an impressive following of readers. Instead, he felt angry towards the categorization of his book into an anti-war novel, black humor, or science fiction because these reductive interpretations "collapsed" its actual complexity into a reassuring simplicity. He was even struck with a depression partly because the book suffered a widespread confusion among the critics and the readers about his real personal philosophy and that of the protagonist Billy Pilgrim. They mistook the fatalism and quietism of the anti-hero for the message that Vonnegut himself was supposed to preach in the novel. Thankfully, with the publication of his other novels and more critical interest in the body of his works, a dozen book-length studies have averted their attention to the complexity of his book and gained more valuable insights into this postmodern masterpiece.

Of the copious comments on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, many have concentrated on the problem-solving functionality of the book. Stanley Schatt remarked that "the message of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the need for compassion" (1976, p. 174). And Thomas L. Wymer said that one of the two central thematic concerns of the book is "a kind of solution" to the horror of war and its dehumanization of man (1976, p. 428). In more recent study, Shang Xiaojin probes the possibilities of art and creative imagination which helps a man confront an intrinsically meaningless universe by emphasizing the interplay between life and fiction (2006). And Todd F. Davis interprets the book as a part of Vonnegut's life-long crusade towards a new kind of humanism by focusing on the understanding of Billy's time travel. Their ideas might have shed a new light on the analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. However, this paper argues that such an abstract concept as innocence is also a part of the solution scheme offered by Vonnegut to remedy the disease of both individuals and the society.

As is known, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, presents two worlds before the readers, one destroyed as illustrated in the Dresden massacre of the past, and the other to be reconstructed in the future in a metaphorical Eden on the planet of Tralfamadore. To a certain extent, a loss of innocence is the cause of the disease in that it results in the personal traumatic experience and the social disorientation from freedom, equality, and justice. It is also one of the symptoms of the disease because it indicates that something is going wrong with the society as well as an individual. To help a person recover from his traumatic war experience and the society be restored back to its healthy state of existence, regaining innocence or reconstructing a world of innocence becomes a natural remedy, whose taste proves to be both wholesomely sweet and disappointingly bitter and consequently whose effect is both promising and despairing.

2. "To Find a Cure for Some Disease"

Once in his autobiographical collage, *Fates Worse than Death*, Vonnegut claims that "I was going to find a cure for some disease" (1991, p. 81). This is in reality what he has done in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The book, which defies any

simplified categorization into an anti-war novel, science fiction or black humor, etc., synthesizes all the elements to project an arduous journey toward healing for Kurt Vonnegut, the participant of WWII and a responsible artist, for Billy Pilgrim, the representative of modern humanity, and for the modern world as well.

As is shown, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, portrays the illness of the narrator. The narrator points out in the first chapter that he has “this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone” (1969, p. 4). By drinking alcohol, the narrator wants to numb the tremendous pain in his inner world. And by calling friends or even strangers, he attempts to distract his mind from the agonizing memory as well as driving away his loneliness. It might be problematic to equate Kurt Vonnegut with the narrator. But it is well-known that he himself had wrestled with his war experience for over twenty years before he summoned up the courage to put down his story. Despite the absence of visible symptoms in him, his trauma has already been ineradicably imprinted on his heart.

As for Billy, he has a mental breakdown in the prison. It merits notice that he has the collapse when he is shrieking comically at the show *Cinderella* rather than when he is witnessing the horrendous blood shedding in battles. This inconsistency is much related with Vonnegut’s desperate humor because laughing might be a better means than crying at the incomprehensible power and the meaningless world. After the war, Billy also suffers from “a complaint” under the effect of which he would find himself weeping “for no apparent reason” (61). And he experiences “a mild nervous collapse” and has to tolerate many sleepless nights (24). Even though the book does not explicitly tell us that it is his war experience that stirs his sleep and impairs his mental health, the undercurrents of pain are more keenly felt on the part of the readers.

In the case of the society, it is also seriously ill owing to such distressing symptoms of massacres, poverty, racial discrimination, etc. To Vonnegut, the world he has seen since he left Indianapolis has not only been physically ill with its visible signs of disorder but also mentally ill or insane with its betrayal of its promises of freedom, justice and equality. People are deprived of free will just like the mechanized Billy Pilgrim, justice is perverted when massacres are perpetrated in broad daylight, and blacks are still fighting for equal rights even though slavery has long before been abolished.

Firstly, the world is mired in many shocking slaughters. Vonnegut points out in his *Fates Worse Than Death* that the firebombing of Dresden is “a tower of smoke and flame to commemorate the rage and heartbreak of so many who had their lives warped or ruined by the indescribable greed and vanity and cruelty of Germany” and “two more such towers would be built by Americans alone in Japan” (1991, p. 103). In addition to Dresden firebombing, more slaughters such as those of the air attack on Tokyo and the atom bomb on Hiroshima were perpetrated out of what Vonnegut calls “the indescribable greed and vanity and cruelty” (1991, p. 103).

Second, the world is sick due to its poverty and racial discrimination. When Billy passes an Illinois black ghetto in his air-conditioned Cadillac, “the neighborhood reminded Billy of some of the towns he had seen in the war” (59). By associating the poverty-stricken ghetto with war-hit areas and contrasting it to Billy’s affluent life, the narrator exposes the harsh conditions the blacks are in. The fact that Billy just drives away when a black taps his window indicates that even simple communication is impossible between the black and the white, not to say becoming “blood brother” (59). Another important issue concerning racial inequality is the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, the prominent leader of Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Even though only one sentence documents the death of this man with a habitual playful way of ending “so it goes,” the narrator reveals how hard it is when people fight for racial equality. He also sends an implicit message to the effect that the government is not competent enough to solve this problem.

Furthermore, Vonnegut considers America as “this modern country with a wonderful Constitution” which “kidnapped human beings and used them as machines” (Allen, 1998, p.102). Namely, people under the leadership of this government are becoming machines without free will to decide their own destinies. However, people are not real machines because they have emotions and feelings and they can feel the pain physically and mentally if somebody like the government inflicts pain on them in one way or another.

Confronted with such alarming personal trauma represented by the narrator and Billy Pilgrim, and the stunning illness of the society, Kurt Vonnegut takes up the responsibility as an artist and begins “a therapeutic process that allows him to uncover and deal with his trauma” (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p.176). In another word, the author is embarking on a journey toward healing. In this journey that spans over twenty-three years, Kurt Vonnegut endeavors to seek a cure among a variety of possibilities, ranging from the Tralfamadorian philosophy of time to the ancient myth of innocence, from the comforting remedies in the outside world to the peace-giving therapies for the inner world. Of all these remedies, innocence is to be spelled out in the following section in terms of its loss and its reconstruction.

3. Innocence as a Remedy

3.1 *The lost world of innocence*

Prior to a critical study of the feasibility of the medicine, it is necessary to point out the meanings of “innocence” involved in the work. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the word “innocence” has two meanings: 1. the fact of being not guilty of a crime; 2. lack of experience of life or knowledge of the bad things in the world (2003, p. 838). These two meanings are given to full play in the war experience concerning the child-like soldiers and the atrocity of the firestorm in Dresden.

Through the depiction of the war experiences, the soldiers are no different from the children who were sold and maltreated back in the year of 1213 on the pretext of “great services they rendered to Christianity” (1969, p. 16). Hence, the subtitle of the book *Children's Crusade* shows that people are inexperienced and free from guilt on the one hand but lose their innocence on the other for some indefinite reasons. First, Billy, the anti-hero, is suggestive of harmlessness and inexperience in terms of his name and his behavior in the war. Instead of “William,” he is called “Billy,” a nickname for a child. In addition, he is involved in the war with a child-like consciousness and meanwhile distances himself by looking on what is happening around him with a child-like perspective. He survives in the last mighty German attack at the age of only twenty-one and is caricatured as “a filthy flamingo” (33), a simile which more often comes vividly in the imagination of children. Such child-like expressions in figurative language abound in other parts of the book. For example, people nestle like a spoon, torn brass buttons fly like popcorn, and the blood turns the snow to the color of raspberry sherbet. Moreover, the companions, the alleged Three Musketeers, dismiss Billy as “this damn college kid” who does not even have a weapon to protect himself (42). In this sense, he is not only harmless to other people, but also incapable of defending himself against dangers from the outside. In addition, Billy has childish dreams. In one of the dreams, he becomes a giraffe caressed by the kisses of female partners (99). As is known, females are often associated with tenderness and guiltlessness. So the dream indicates that Billy wishes to escape into a world of innocence since the real one is made dangerous by some forces that he cannot understand.

Another incident that merits our attention is that Billy puts on the silver boots of Cinderella: “The boots fit perfectly. Billy Pilgrim was Cinderella, and Cinderella was Billy Pilgrim (145).” As is known to all, Cinderella, a character in a fairy tale, disentangles herself from the wicked world of her step-mother and step-sisters and unites herself with the realm of the charming Prince, which is often symbolic of a world of happiness. By identifying himself with Cinderella, Billy also expresses his wish to disassociate himself from the perilous world and join the fairy kingdom of innocence. Another reason is given by Sharon Sieber.

Clearly, the little girl (Cinderella) who gets her name from sweeping cinders is a reference to the incineration of Jews as well as to the Allied incineration of Dresden. (2000, p. 152)

According to this critical survey, this incident foreshadows the murder of countless innocent people or rather the loss of innocence that unfolds in the latter part of the book. Moreover, the image of cinders does appear before the prisoners depart for Dresden. The hobo “was nestling with thin air and cinders” (1969, p. 148). Most ironically, the death of the hobo is confounding because “he was in a fetal position, trying even in death to nestle like a spoon with others” (148). It seems that a man who cannot live in a world of innocence might be able to embrace one in his death like a fetus nestling peacefully in the womb. Indeed those childlike soldiers, to a certain degree, are just babies in the womb. When Billy and other POWs work in a factory that makes malt syrup for pregnant women, they derive “ravenous gratitude” from eating the syrup, in a stealthy way though (160). Even though the soldiers are undoubtedly not pregnant women, they become contented fetus in a womb that draws nutrition from the sweet syrup. In truth, the novel unfolds many other womb images. Billy survives by falling constantly into ditches from boxcars, from the sky in a plane crash. The most prominent example is the Dresden slaughterhouse itself. Originally as a place for pigs to be butchered, it now becomes one for baby-soldiers to be protected. When 135,000 people were killed in one big flame, the American POWs and four guards were preserved down in the meat locker, another symbolic womb in the story.

If all the above emphasizes the nostalgia for innocence, the forthcoming analysis reveals the bitterness of loss of innocence. In contrast to the guiltless and inexperienced portrayed above, some people are on the brink of losing innocence. Roland Weary was only eighteen, “at the end of an unhappy childhood” (35). Even though he is still a teenager, he is on the verge of losing the freedom from sin and cunning. He relates with relish the torture weapons of his father and revels in seeing and inventing “other neat tortures” (36). He frankly tells Billy that he has read about or seen neat tortures in the movies or heard on the radio. Implicitly, the society is plagued by an epidemic which shows the symptom of catering for the bloodlust of some people and misleading others into a belief that violence is a justified act in the world. Like Roland Weary, Paul Lazzaro, a twelve-year-old boy, shows deplorable signs of losing

innocence. He exults in bloody revenge and says that “he could have anybody in the world killed for a thousand dollars plus traveling expenses” (140). Judging from these two child soldiers, they should have a fear for wars which is natural in a naïve child, but on the contrary they behave more like those in power who rejoice in killing the innocent. This might be attributable to the reason why the world of innocence is destroyed to the despair of the narrator or to Kurt Vonnegut himself. Even Billy the innocent confesses that he “had contemplated torture and hideous wounds at the beginning and the end of nearly every day of his childhood” (38). This implies that actually he is not so innocent enough as to have no knowledge about the cruelty of mankind. Even though he himself turns out to be a harmless man, he has savored the direfully amazing taste of blood in his imagination.

Another incident is also a lament over the loss of innocence. When Billy and Roland are captured by the Germans, two of whom are “boys in their early teens” (52), they are told to look at the image of Adam and Eve in the corporal’s boots. As is believed, Adam and Eve symbolize the innocence and lost innocence. As Billy is gazing on a fantasy picture of unspoiled human innocence, it merits note that the golden boots are spoils, tainted with blood from the killing machine of war and that the pair of feet along with the image of Adam and Eve are swaddled in rags also as a result of the disastrous power of war. One of the boys is also associated with Eve instead of with Adam, emphasizing his distance from manhood and his vulnerability. However, the enviable ingenuous quality in this Eve-like boy will also soon be discounted considering that time and experience will put blood on his hands. It is also ironical that the Germans’ dog is called Princess, another name linked with fairy tales as that of Cinderella. The dog, an animal though, is parallel to those inexperienced young soldiers who are forced to lose innocence and become an accomplice in the war.

The subtitle *Children’s Crusade* reappears in the exclamation of the head Englishman who is in charge of the hospital before Billy and other POWs are transferred to Dresden.

We have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. ‘My God, my God —’ I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade.’ (106)

The exclamation indeed highlights both the precious innocence in the soldiers and bewails the innocence that is soon to be consumed by folly and cruelty.

To the relief of the readers, these baby POWs survive the firestorm of Dresden by a mere stroke of luck but to the despair of the writer and other humane people, an innumerable number of innocent people are killed. In this respect, it is to be mentioned that, some critics like Donald E. Morse, in studying this war experience well-wrought in a postmodern fashion, draw a parallel between the disaster-stricken Dresden and the loss of Job in Old Testament by saying “Looking back at these events, Vonnegut raises anew Job’s questions: ‘Why do the innocent suffer?’ ‘Why do the evil prosper?’ (80)” If Job the innocent only suffers the loss of tangible material possessions and the countable deaths of his children and servants, approximately 135,000 civilians are estimated to have lost their lives in the massacre of Dresden, more than the total number of the mortalities in Tokyo and Hiroshima. When Billy and other prisoners arrive at Dresden, the Skyline “looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven” (148), but “the sky was black with smoke” and “the sun was an angry little pinhead” (178) when they first come out of the shelter alive while “everybody else in the neighborhood was dead” (178). So in contrast to the heavenly former, the world destroyed in the firestorm is more like a hell even though Billy dismisses it as a crated moon as in a way peculiar to him who strikes the readers most by employing his lightest touch in a distance on the heaviest blow in human tragedy. Therefore, it does make sense when William Rodney Allen observes, “*Slaughterhouse-Five* conveys at times an almost childlike sense of shock that the world is such a violent place” (1991, p. 96).

3.2 *A world of innocence to be reconstructed*

Now that the world of innocence has been destroyed and left a traumatic imprint on Billy, how to pull through the present and the future becomes another problem. It seems that Billy or the narrator was groping in his imagination a way out to reconstruct the world in order to encounter the gloomy shadow of the past. On the night of his daughter’s wedding, he watches a backward movie and in his imagination:

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby... Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve. (75)

Hence, another Adam-and-Eve image is conjured up upon the wish of Billy who shrinks from the hideous world of war and longs for one of innocence where they are no murderers but naïve babies. So according to Arnold Edelstein, this Eden imagery is related to the womb imagery and “in the long run, Eden and the womb seem identical — places of retreat beyond which Billy cannot regress” (412). However, the history cannot be readapted just like the

backward movie and Billy still have to relive the agonies through his memory or time travel to the past. He is often sleepless, which he tries to manage by turning to the Magic Fingers, a product of advanced technology. He is restless and takes refuge in reading the science fiction written by Kilgore Trout. Most important, he is a time-traveler in whom “there is a naiveté... which experience can’t change, and knowing the secrets of past and future, life and death, does not and cannot give Billy the power to change the present” as noted by Sharon Sieber (2000, p.147).

As for his experience on Tralfamadore, it is more a metaphor of a retreat from the unbearable past and insignificant present than a reality that proves the existence of extraterrestrial people to satisfy those science-fiction lovers. Billy seems to be contented with the life on this planet as if he were a naïve baby in his “cradle” lounge chair (111). He is provided with all necessary furnishings in the simulated Earthling habitat even though the household appliances turn out to be more ornamental than useful. Most important, “Billy resembles Adam in the zoo on Tralfamadore where he lives naked and innocently with his mate in the Tralfamadorian ideal of human paradise” as noted by Dolores K. Gros Louis (1990, p. 419). They caress each other and have a “heavenly” time together (133). Besides, the Eve-transfigured Montana, who is once a blue movie star though, gives birth to a baby, which signifies a rebirth of the world. Hence, mass killing in Dresden puts an end to life and here birth is a beginning of life. However, even this reconstructed Eden is not as promising as the paradise indicated in the Bible. First, they reproduce only to the delight and glee of their audience, Tralfamadorians. These aliens behave like voyeurs who spy on how human beings communicate and function in their simulated Earthling zoo. Thus, instead of the admirable Adam and Eve, Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack are reduced to mating animals who are in the charge of a zoo keeper and satisfy the curiosity of their beholders. Second, the Tralfamadorian idealistic Adam and Eve are not free. It seems that everything they do is predestined, including how to breastfeed the baby: “She moved the baby from one breast to the other, because the moment was so structured that she had to do so (207).”

Billy is not free, either. Though he is unstuck in time, he cannot control where he will be the next minute. In a sense, Billy and Montana are no better than animals to be experimented on in a scientifically admirable laboratory or prisoners deprived of freedom in a future jail. In truth, Billy does relate Tralfamadore with the prison where he stays as a POW. When he time-travels to the war and is asked to pass a delousing station, he says that being deloused is “the first thing they told him to do on Tralfamadore, too” (83). Moreover, when Billy is asked by a Tralfamadorian whether he is happy in the zoo, he responds with “about as happy as I was on Earth” (114). As is known, Billy is by no means happy on Earth since he is tortured by his traumatic Dresden experience. Thus, on no account can he be happy on the imaginary planet or in the semi-prison.

Besides, it has almost become Billy’s motto to believe that “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference” (60). This quietism shows his helplessness in changing the past, the present or the future. In this sense, Tralfamadore, as an embodiment of Eden myth, actually “masks and attempts to dignify escapist, regressive fantasies” (Edelstein, 1990, p. 412). After all, even if this is a paradise, it will also be destroyed since Tralfamadorians say that the whole Universe will disappear as a result of a mechanical mistake on the part of a Tralfamadorian test pilot (117). Therefore, even this reconstructed Eden cannot endure for ever and this is merely a wishful thinking on the part of Billy. However, at least this picture in the zoo demonstrates to us humanity’s wish to continue the race that may somewhat counterbalance humanity’s tendency to destroy it.

4. Conclusion

By probing the lost world of innocence and a reconstructed ideal in this book, we can perceive a predicament or helplessness on the part of Billy Pilgrim. On the one hand, he bewails the fact that the world of simplicity and harmlessness has been destroyed as indicated in the child-soldiers and the monstrosity of the air attack in Dresden. On the other, his wish to reconstruct a domain where people are as innocent as babies or Adam and Eve becomes problematic given that it is hinged on the possibility of an E. T. phenomenon, that is, the doubtful existence of another planet where aliens are actually not so much innocent as committed to the belief of quietism by ignoring horrible wars and spending “eternity looking at pleasant moments” (1969, p. 117). So innocence might have been a sweet cure for the past trauma but its effect is undercut by the reality: it has been lost and cannot be restored in an oversimplified manner such as by reconstructing it in a backward movie or on an imaginary utopia.

Despite the failure to find innocence as an appropriate remedy for the ills of the society, Kurt Vonnegut continues his quest for a medicine in this postmodern novel. In this sense, what distinguishes Vonnegut from other writers is “his incredulity toward final answers and his unflagging determination to find pragmatic responses to profound questions” (Davis, 2006, p. 7). From the perspective of the writer, what matters is the efforts that he has made for the improvement of the society. Just because an attempt to find out whether innocence can be a possible remedy is also part of the author’s struggles in his search for a better future of this diseased world, such a bittersweet medicine as

innocence is invested with significance. In the process of proving the efficacy of the medicine, Vonnegut can proceed to other therapies so as to make possible a silver lining of hope in the green wagon and the leafing trees at the end of the story.

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