

Time Travel in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- Five***Intisar Rashid Khaleel (M.A)****University of Tikrit - College of Education****Department of English Language****Abstract:**

For many years, time travel was the stuff of science fiction. This was all just part of the world's imagination until recently. Science authors, among them, Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) post-modern American writer, believe that one can travel through time forward or backward asking his memories and stream of consciousness to give sensory impressions of his thoughts and actions, that what Billy did in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- Five* (1969). The protagonist Billy Pilgrim finds himself "unstuck in time" jumping between several periods of his life. Travelling between his experiences as a prisoner of war in World War II to his family life in 1950s, and 1960s and his time on Tralfamadorian Planet, Billy has the freedom and ability to travel; he has no control over these transitions. The present study falls into three sections plus a conclusion. The first section deals with the concept of time travel in literature and fiction. Section two presents historical and literary context to Vonnegut's novel. The treatment of time travel concept will be discussed in the third section. Then, the conclusions which sum up the findings of the research.

Keywords: time travel, science fiction, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- Five*.

التنقل بالزمن في رواية فونجنت مجزر رقم ٥
م.م. انتصار رشيد خليل
جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

المخلص:

كان موضوع الانتقال بالزمن مادة الرواية العلمية لسنوات عديدة . كان كل ذلك مجرد جزء من خيال العالم مؤخرًا . إن الكتاب العلمي ، من بينهم الكاتب الأمريكي المعاصر كورت فونجنت (١٩٢٢ - ٢٠٠٧) يعتقدون إن بإمكان الشخص أن ينتقل بالزمن للأمام أو رجوعاً للوراء مطالباً ذكرياته وتيار الوعي خاصته أن يعطي انطباعات حسية لأفكاره وتصرفاته ، هذا ما قام به بيلي في رواية فونجنت مجزر رقم ٥ (١٩٦٩) يجد بطل الرواية بيلي بلجرم نفسه غير عالق في الزمن متنقلاً بين فترات عديدة من حياته . كان لبيلي ، وهو متنقلاً بين تجاربه كسجين حرب في الحرب العالمية الثانية إلى عائلته وبيته في ١٩٥٠ و ١٩٦٠ ، بعد ذلك انتقاله بالزمن إلى كوكب ترالفامادور ، الحرية والقدرة على الانتقال بالزمن ، وذلك لعدم سيطرته على تلك التنقلات. يقع البحث المقدم في ثلاثة فصول وخاتمة . يتعامل الفصل الأول مع مفهوم الانتقال بالزمن في الأدب والرواية . يقدم الفصل الثاني سياقاً تاريخياً وأدبياً لرواية فونجنت . أما مفهوم الانتقال بالزمن في الرواية فسيتم مناقشته في الفصل الثالث ومن ثم الخاتمة التي تلخص ما توصل إليه البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانتقال بالزمن، الرواية العلمية، رواية فونجنت مجزر رقم ٥.

1.1 Science Fiction:

In fictional form, the term science fiction refers to the influence of scientific advances on human life. It examines the aspirations of human being to exist on another planet, or travelling to a future world, or to

imagined universe, like Utopia (Mikes: 273).

Since Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) is considered a pioneer of science fiction, yet the real science fiction principles have antecedents in the 19th century through the novels of H.G. Wells (1866-1946). Among the best-known authors of science fictions are Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlien and Kurt Vonnegut (Ibid: 279). The latter is often considered himself as a science writer, and who is best known of his political using imaginary setting for political and social satire (James & Mendelsohn: 137). Nearly all of Vonnegut's works contain science fiction premises or themes.

1.2 What is Time Travel?

Time travel is a recurring theme in science fiction since 1800s', it means either going forward in time or backward, to experience the future, or the past. Travelling through time is feat thought by most to be impossible. Therefore, for centuries, this idea has intrigued mystics, scientists, and philosophers. Clifford Pickover raises a question concerning the sense of time and whether or not time travel will be possible. Then he narrates a story of an immigrant to America who has lost his watch. "He walks up to a man on a New York street and asks, please, Sir, what is time? "The scientist replies, "I'm sorry, you'll have to ask a philosopher. I'm just a physicist". (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia). Galileo and Einstein state that time is what a clock reads. That leads to idea that clock hands can travel equal distances in equal times. Actually, this idea is understandable and useful for everyday life, but scientists find that time is like a clay in the hands of a cosmic sculptor.

1.3 History of Time Travel:

Scientists believe that the current laws of physics allow us to travel through time; science fiction writers assert this idea to enter the public imagination. H.G. Wells is one of the first science authors who explores the idea that we could travel through time. *The Time Machine* (1895) is a novel in which Wells uses a vehicle that allows an operator to travel through time to gain mechanical control over time as well as return to the present to bring back history to know the effects and the consequences of the present on the future (Ibid). For centuries, a number of stories involving

elements of non-technological forms of time travel had appeared in literature. The Mahabharatha narrates a story of Revaita, in this *Hindus Methodology*, the king who travels to another world to meet the creator Brahma, when he returns back discovering that many ages have passed when he reaches Earth. Another tale is *Urashima Taro* which mentions the story of Japanese young fisherman who stays in place under the sea for three years. When he returns back home, he astonishes that three hundred years have passed. He is forgotten, and recognizing nothing of the new future now. *Anno 7603* is a Norwegian play written by Johan Herman Wessel in 1781, shows the travel of two main characters to the future by a fairy. Other examples of time travel in fiction are found in Edward Page Mitchell's *The Clock that Went Backward* (1881), *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy, *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Mark Twain (Ibid) . Many writers in history have written science fictions and have dealt with the concept of time travel and had great success with them, but only a few have been as enduring overtime as Kurt Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse-Five. He uses structure and point of view to portray the theme of time in relative.

1.4 Kinds of Time Travel:

1. Changing the past: Jennifer Ashton asks a hypothetical question "What if so-and so had done things differently?" or "What if such-and –such-had happened differently?" in this kind the traveller goes to past and interact with it changing the history to fulfill his destiny. Example of this type is *Last Darkness Fall* by L. Sprague de Caup. (Ashton: 68).

2. Protecting the time: in this type, the people try to protect the time from the changes by other traveller; it becomes out of their property. Time Lord is the protagonist of *Doctor Who* who fights to prevent the strangers from spreading the evil and changing time to worse; he also protects the people of his city whom most of them are scholars and historians whose jobs are to observe histories.

3. Preventing a bad future: in this genre, the traveller goes to the future recognizing its danger, having either turned into a dystopia or resulting in the end of the world. Thus, the traveller tries to change something in the present to prevent the dangers of bad future.

4. Unintentional change: the character is taken to the past against his will or he intends to see his private past then when he returns back discovering that

his future is changed unintentionally because of Butterfly effect. For example, *A Sound of Thunder* (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia).

Most time travel stories focus on a traveller who is sent back in time to learn about how different choices yield different result, and to grow as a person, and are used to explain those lessons in an unusual way. Time travel is thus a vehicle for the writer to narrate a moral story, or to delve into human condition, reflecting on choices and how those choices affect events. Or perhaps about fate and how we are bound to some actions, but how those actions lead to the present moment. Because of the difficult bureaucratic structures that the modern man struggles, he wishes if he can travel through time to shape history and to make a real change to the way the present turns out.

2.1 Historical / Literary Context:

"There is nothing to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and is always is, except for the birds" (S F:18)

It is important to first look at the historical in which the book was written when one begins to analyze a military novel. The novel is largely set during World War II. It treats one of the most horrific massacres in European history-the firebombing of Dresden, a city in eastern Germany, on the night of February 13-14, 1945- with mock-1serious humor and clear antiwar sentiment. Dresden is destroyed by the worst air attacks in the history of man. The novel concentrates on the capture of American soldiers by the Germans during the battle of Bulge. More than 130, 000 civilians died in Dresden, nearly twice as many deaths than the atomic bombing of Hiroshema, actually a few American prisoners and their German guards are still alive. Dresden was never fortified or used for strategic purposes and, then, was not considered a military target. For this reason, thousands of refugees from all over Europe converged on Dresden for protection; its apparent safety for them. (Smith: 11).

Two opposite reasons for the bombing have emerged. The first contradicted reason is that the advancing of Russian army on the Eastern front and that what the German forces need to repel them. Second the Western Allies represented by Great Britain, United States and France) would deter Russians grabbing land, and if the latter did so, the bombing would make the land in vain. (Ibid: 12)

The survivors of the bombing were later used to dig through the rubble for corpses and to begin the clean-up of the city. This factual background information is a key to understanding the book and the core around which the other sub-plots revolve. The novel is based on Kurt Vonnegut's own experience in World War II, his capture and becoming a prisoner of war and his witnessing of the firebombing of Dresden. The people in the war are, for the most part, real; Vonnegut just changes all the names. The main character however does not seem to have been a real person, and has a very unusual war experience. After twenty years of struggling with research, failing to recall personal experience, and publishing two novels and countless short stories, Kurt Vonnegut finally published as what he frequently refers to as the "book about Dresden. It was titled *Slaughterhouse- Five* or the *Children's Crusade: A Duty A Duty Dance with Death*, or more simply: *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Vonnegut, like his protagonist Billy Pilgrim, emerged from a meat locker beneath a slaughter-house into the moonscape of burned-out Dresden. His surviving captors put him to work finding, burying and burning bodies. He survived by chance, confined as a prisoner of war in a well-insulated meat locker while the Allies unleashed one of the most relentless air raids of the war. (Marvin: 5-6).

Like the real events of the author himself, in 1917, aliens from a planet called Tralfamadore abduct Billy and teach him that time does not progress linearly, like human beings witness it, but alternatively, all moments happen simultaneously, and they are structured as so. Vonnegut presents a series of episodes with no chronological order, by this he uses or invents a new way of telling a story. He asserts that it is the best way to portray the absurdity of war. (Ibid: 113-114).

Vonnegut is completely against the war; everyone participated in that war exhibit some of insane because of the horrific events they witness. Now he does not allow aggression to happen. (Simmons: 180). The moral message he aims to convey through this military novel is to prohibit all the people not to enter in any war whatever the reasons were. In one interview he says:

When I speak to students, I do moralize. I tell them not to take more than they need,, I tell them not to kill, even in self-defense.[...] I tell them not to commit war crimes or to help others to commit war crimes or to help others to commit war crimes. These morals go over very well. (Mustazza: 34).

Though Vonnegut takes part in the war against Germany, he looks at the dead soldiers as victims; the death is a curse inflicted by the war. He urges everyone not to indulge himself in anything causing the destruction of humanity.

3. Time Travel in Slaughterhouse- Five

"All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist." (S F).

One of the most distinguishing aspects of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the structure in which it is written. Vonnegut uses fragmentation of time, structure and character in order to unify his non-linear narrative. Throughout the novel, Billy Pilgrims, the protagonist of the novel travels uncontrollably to non-sequential moments of his life, or as Vonnegut says, "paying random visits to all events in between" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*: 23). This mirrors the structure of the novel which has a beginning, middle and end but not in their traditional places. Billy Pilgrims shifts from one period of his life to another is his own defense mechanism in dealing with traumatic experience in his life. Vonnegut has acknowledged that he used his fragmented manner and that it refused to come out as a linear story to expose the absurdity of war, together with the firebombing of Dresden which make such painful memories in Billy Pilgrim's life.

Billy Pilgrim, has come "unstuck in time: (SF: 23) any point in his life, he may find himself suddenly at another point in his past or future. The concept of "unstuck in time" refers that Billy has become free. Consequently, Vonnegut's narrative, as well as, Billy has achieved a freedom of sorts. The narrator will not be restricted by the conventional form of time; now he can place Billy in any time frame he chooses. Therefore, Vonnegut gives Billy the ability to travel by time to Dresden, for example, to give us the accurate picture about the wartime experience. Marvin asserts that:

Time travel allows Vonnegut to create the impression that readers are looking at events as they happen, rather than through the mists of memory. But because most readers do not believe in time travel, the technique also highlights the artificiality of any writing about the past. (Marvin: 114).

Then Vonnegut sheds light on the biography of Billy in order to make his entire life as well as his emotional side known for the reader. By jumping back and forth in his life, the reader is able to see a whole picture of what he is actually like. Billy, an optometrist in his Ilium, New York, serves in the army after his graduating from high school class, and is taken

prisoner by the Germans, when he returns home, he marries fiancée. On his way to an optometrist's Convention, his plane destroys, everyone dies except Billy. He moves to New York city, speaks at a radio show and writes to a newspaper about his trip to an alien planet Tralfamadore. Billy finds himself "time tripping" with the people of that planet. The Tralfamadorians do not believe in time, to them time does not exist. Billy's time trapping allows the author to join three main experiences of the novel: the horror of the war and Dresden, Billy's normal life in Ilium, and his time on the alien planet.

3.1 Billy's War Time

Billy encounters asleep-like state when he is marching through a forest with his three companions leaning against a tree, he sees "full arc of his life: (SF: 54) from birth to death, especially those a terrifying moment from his childhood. As a child, his father throws him into the deep end of the pool, in an attempt to make him learning to swim. Billy nearly drowns and has to be rescued and revived. Consequently, this scene has reminded him of the same horrific situation of war and the nearness of death. The first example of time travel is from his memories of childhood to war in Dresden.

During the Second World War, Billy becomes a perpetual prisoner of war, returning again and again in his mind to this scene. Within the book,

Dresden seems to be the centre of all the major actions taking place to make the reader learn a little more, each time, about the war. Vonnegut assures in his first chapter of the book that he is not going to glorify war. The two scouts leave Billy and his friend Ronald Weary behind, so the latter are captured by the Germans and became prisoners.

Billy is being photographed by menacing German soldiers who are reenacting his capture for the camera, his shoes seem ruined civilian ones to show the world the fake reputation of the story rich American soldier. When the German newsphotographer takes the picture of Billy, the latter moves in time to the Lions Club in America during 1967. The red light was in the middle of the Iliums, back ghetto, the place was full of American luxuries. Billy finds himself entertains the richness of American's life, then, a black man taps appeared on Billy's window, the light is disappeared to put Billy in the railroad cars for the trip to the prison camp. One may find that there is no close relationship between the two events, but that shows the reader the facts about the American poor soldier, and that he is not rich as the American war propaganda states. (Marvin: 119).

Billy is sent with his mates to Dresden where there is no place for war industries, it is absolutely the most safe city; the American prisoners are not fear of an Allied bombing raid, but what happened is completely the opposite, Dresden is destroyed. During the destruction, Billy and other prisoners were underground in a storage room deep beneath the slaughterhouse. Everyone in Dresden were killed except Billy and other survivals. After having to dig through the rubble of Dresden, in search of corpses, he was rescued. Eventually he arrives at an inn and is given shelter in the stable. (Ibid: 120-122)

The night before the firebombing, Billy remembers his eighteen wedding anniversary, he moves in time to the party that he is hosting. There were a group of optometrists and Kilgore Trout, the writer of science fiction who speculates that Billy has seen the past through a time window. The group is entertained by a barbershop quartet except Billy who seems confused as if there is trouble inside him and affected him deeply. Billy associates the optometrists' barbershop quartet with the four German guards, who survived along with the American prisoners. (Ibid: 121-122)

Billy's collapse is completed by two incidents-the plane crash and the death of his wife who is on her way to the hospital, where Billy is after the plane crash. Billy was going to a convention of optometrists; everyone is killed in that crash except Billy, this event linked him to Dresden in such ways (Ibid: 122). Billy's brain is slightly damaged, while he was in the hospital, he read science-fiction novels, specifically about aliens called Tralfamadorians and time travel. The doctor instructs him that he suffers from mental instability, his war experiences, then surely the steady succession of deaths and a plane crash would catalyze mental disorder. In addition to all these reasons, Billy is tormented by the fact of his having survived of the war and he is the lonely saved from the plane crash. He feels guilty; he thinks that his survival is a curse; he cannot stand the idea of living knowing that so many had died.

3.2 The World of Tralfamadorians

Billy is abducted by the Tralfamadorians. The spaceship hovers over him, he is trapped on their spaceship, which may or may not exist in his real life, but surely it exists at least within his own mind, because without them he cannot live with himself. The Tralfamadore is not an alternative world but an alternative conception of time and space (Bloom : 75). He believes that he is trapped by those aliens to be an exhibit of human being in their planet.

The Tralfamadorians teach Billy the nature of time from their own perception. They provided him the escape that he needs from his guilt. Their belief is that, "when a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that same person is just fine in plenty of other moments." (SF: 27). Furthermore, he is not restricted by a frame of time to which the human world is forced to live in. He can travel in time towards any point he wants. Thus, they learn him that the firebombing of Dresden is just a tiny frame in the vast space time continuum.

Today we do (have peace). On other days we have wars as horrible as any you 've even seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do about them, so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments. (SF: 101)

Vonnegut did that, but by writing about the painful memories, no one can find an accurate series of events, but there is coherence in those events by them. (Tomedi: 62)

The Tralfamadorians are not locked in a three dimensional, but they can observe a fourth dimension free from time itself. By this, they are different mentality from the human being on earth; they even criticize the beliefs or those on earth. They give further explanation to their own concept of time to make Billy realizing the mystery of time, by comparing all time

to a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, where each peak is a moment of time, and by having the ability of fourth dimensional travel can look at any of these peaks. Thus, Billy will have the ability to see any period and even any certain moment of his life in the past or future.

Billy accepts the Tralfamadorian philosophy; he frees himself from the responsibility of the actions and the guilt of "Why me?" and the metal sphere around his head because this view eliminates that question. He

could release himself from the human perception of time, and now he is aware of the big gap between the aliens' view of time and human's. The latter vision is restricted and narrow. This view evokes his crusading against war and feel upset when the life of human is blindly taken. With this new perception of time he started to feel no sympathy towards death and made no attempt to stop the absurdity and atrocities of war.

3.3 "So it goes"

Vonnegut's manipulation of time allows him to use the phrase "so it goes" which appears after every death scene. After the death of Billy's father in a haunting accident, Vonnegut utters "so it goes", after one hundred thirty thousand innocent people dies in Dresden, and after the death of his wife with carbon monoxide. "So it goes" allows the bridge from death to life, it makes the writer to change the time frame of the action and it also makes Billy waits death calmly, with no fear or horror. Vonnegut's aim is to cheapen death and perceives it to be insignificant and a rather indifferent matter. Allowing no moment of silence to the victims in his novel. The word "it" in "so it goes" refers to death, that means life goes without pay attention to death or loss of someone.

When Billy hears the new of Vietnam War, he does not care to what happen because it always will happen and no one can comfort or stop it. It is just a frame in time according to Tralfamadorians concept. Actually, this negligence of human issues does not relate to the nature of human conscious. Tomedi objects and refuses this concept and concentrates on a fact that "if what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Trafamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes to be". (Tomedi: 62)

Although the escape of reality that Billy lives, and the peace that he finds in accepting the aliens' perception of time, he extracts himself from the human sensations, realization and conscious which separate the human from the rest of the animal world.

Conclusions:

Vonnegut's unusual manipulation of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals all the stages of Billy Pilgrim's life and his personal experience more closely than if he had abided with conventional sequence. This fragmentation of time reflects not only Billy's character, but to illustrate the Tralfamadorian's perception of time theory, and to present occurrences of the Dresden experience as an on-going atrocity. All the moments of his life, past, present and future can be arrived at as if they are geographical places. He has the ability to jump anywhere and anytime he wants. Vonnegut interweaves unrelated events, no matter how fictitious they are, relate them to reality and to give them meaning, the scene of alienation and dislocation which follow the experience of war. Billy's being "unstuck in time" serves as a metaphor for man's instability to keep the threat of the memories of horrific war far away from his relative serenity of his present. He does not

only remember these frailty experiences; they are relived in his tired mind. Although Billy finds some peace in alienating himself from what happen around him according to Tralfamadorian's time theory to some extent, Vonnegut is not. Vonnegut does not neglect the bad moments of his life to concentrate on the beautiful ones. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the proof.

Bibliography:

1. Ashton, Jennifer (2005) *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Bloom, Harold (2009) *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kurt Vonnegut*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
3. James, Edward & Mendelsohn, Farah (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Marvin, Thomas F. (2002) *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers*. London: Westport, Connecticut.
5. Mikics, David (2007) *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
6. Mustazza, Leonard (2011) *Critical Insights: Slaughterhouse-Five*. USA: Salem Press.
7. Simmons, David (2009) *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Smith, Dennis Stanton (1997) *Cliffs Notes on Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York. Hungry Minds Inc.
9. Tomedi, John (2004) *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kurt Vonnegut*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
10. Vonnegut, Kurt (1969) *Slaughterhouse_Five* . New York : Dell.
11. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, 2001.