

An Analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with Sartre's Existentialism

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Abstract: In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses the techniques of science fiction and postmodernism to describe the painful moments in Billy's life, exhibiting the absurdity of war, death and life, the loss and alienation of human nature, and helplessness as well as indifference to death. This paper will employ Sartre's existentialism to explore how to transcend the absurdity of life and overcome severe trauma on the body and mind caused by World War II, in an attempt to find the essence of life and restore confidence in life.

Keywords: Existentialism; Freedom; Responsibility; Absurdity

Introduction

Billy's war experience in *Slaughterhouse-Five* came from Vonnegut's personal experience of escaping an extremely horrific firebombing in a camp in Dresden, Germany. Vonnegut endured the trauma of war physically and mentally. This experience made him contemplate the meaning of freedom and life, conveying the misery and distress of war. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* expresses Sartre's existential philosophy that life is absurd, which is his weapon to fight against the absurd and alienated world.

1. Kurt Vonnegut's free choice

Sartre believes that when a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislature deciding for the whole of mankind--in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. Following the example of Lot's wife in *Bible*, Vonnegut looks back at the Second World War and the fire-bombing of Dresden despite the risk of turning into a pillar of salt, which he regards as humane. As a result, Vonnegut wrote this novel to express his sympathy and humanism due to his free choice.

In the first chapter, Vonnegut expresses his attitude towards the war that "people cannot take part in massacres under any circumstances and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee and that we can't work for companies that make massacre machinery and express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that". This is Vonnegut's free choice with a sense of responsibility, as it seeks to make all mankind realize the horror and absurdity of war. Humans are free. The author takes responsibility for his individuality as well as for all humankind, by which people can discover the meaning of life, reconstruct their identity and further regain dignity.

2. The absurdity of war

Vonnegut directly displays the absurdity and cruelty of war at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is reflected in the subtitle of the novel, *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance With Death*. War is irrelevant to children, but millions of children without formal training are forced to become warriors, dancing with death on the dangerous, fierce but meaningless battlefields. The author expresses the savageness of war by describing the jihad in Palestine, alluding to the absurdity of World War II and the Vietnam War.

During World War II, individuals lost the pursuit of hope and truth and were resigned to a meaningless life. However, there is no hope of victory in the war, with the only result of the death of thousands of people and the destruction of civilization as well as truth. Billy considers that "the kindest and funniest ones, the ones who hated war the most, were the

ones who'd really fought". Only when "presence-in-itself" is deeply immersed in the dangerous battlefield will people truly realize the cruelty and absurdity of war, thus endeavoring to seek the meaning of life. Therefore, those who stay away from war cannot profoundly understand the cruelty and ruthlessness of war as well as the absurdity and despair of life.

Vonnegut repeatedly mentions the execution of Edgar Derby for taking a teapot in the ruins as the most absurd thing in the war. On the contrary, the Axis, which started the Second World War, and the United States, which bombed Dresden and Japanese civilians, prospered with impunity. Is it justifiable to launch a massacre for the sake of justice? This strong contrast reflects the absurdity and meaninglessness of war and the conflict between people. With the corpse of a schoolgirl in the water tower, the candles and the soap made from the fat of rendered people or enemies, and the instant destruction of a civilized city under fire-bombing, readers can directly feel the cruelty and savagery of war.

"The world is absurd, and life is miserable." This principle of existentialism is reflected in the fact that Billy is forced to take part in World War II as a chaplain's assistant, but he is treated inhumanely by others. Billy wears the unsuitable clothes of the dead, and he looks like a broken kite. Besides, He will just smirk after being humiliated, bullied and tortured by his comrades. The carriage full of prisoners of war is just like a separate organism, eating and excreting through a small hole. Edgar Derby, the high school teacher, is cast into the meaningless battlefield accidentally. He survives the war but finally be shot to death for taking a teapot after the triumph, exhibiting the survival predicament of common people due to the absurd war. Confronting the war, people are powerless and depressed, losing "presence-for-itself". They can only accept the ruthless arrangement of fate, losing their essence and self-awareness to become "presence-in-itself" with the attributes of things. The inhabitants on Tralfamadore believe that "there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers". Humans are powerless and resigned to war and death under such absurd circumstances.

The true trauma of Vonnegut's wartime experience is reflected in Billy's life experience. Billy is traumatized physically and mentally in the brutal war, and the effects of this trauma are irreversible and permanent. Even after the war, Billy, who lives a prosperous life in the middle class, is still unable to escape the shadow of the war, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and lose the pursuit of the spiritual belief, showing the repercussion of the horrible and inhumane war on humans.

Through Billy's experience in the war, Vonnegut renders readers understand the cruelty and absurdity of the war, the conflict and alienation of the relationship between people. The cruelty of war makes people lose their free will, self-consciousness and dignity. People are powerless and inevitable so they have to accept the current situation. People are "bugs trapped in the amber", thus losing the value of existence and the meaning of life. This distorted alienation generates permanent trauma both physically and mentally. Billy's experience embodies the powerlessness of human beings in the absurd world, as well as Sartre's existential thought that existence is absurd.

3. Alienation and absurdity of life

Existentialism believes that the value of the individual is above everything else, and that the individual and society are forever separated and opposed. Therefore, fear, loneliness, disappointment and the sense of abandonment are human basic feelings in the world. The process of existence is the process of death. Because people always live miserably in such an absurd world, life is distressing. *Slaughterhouse-Five* revisits numerous significant moments in Billy's life through time and space travel, filled with fear, horror, death, absurdity and pain at every moment.

Billy is free from the shackles of time and can freely shuttle between the past, present and future, and knows everything that will happen in the future. However, Billy can't control where he will go next, and he can't do anything about what will happen. All arrangements and destinies are predestined and cannot be changed. The fatalism of Tralfamadore believes that everything is arranged and that people are "bugs in the amber" for everything.

Sartre believes that "existence precedes essence, man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards. Humans are free, and there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it". In the first chapter, a professor of anthropology believes that "there is absolutely no difference between anybody". However, through Billy's life experience, we discover that there are distinct individuals, and the nature and behavior of

people are totally different. The reason is that people's free choices determine their behaviors, creating different people. There is no mold about the essence of people in the world.

The absurd life caused humans to live without a free will under social restrictions and uncontrollable force. However, humans are still required to make decisions and be responsible for themselves and for mankind. This contradiction is indicative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. Billy decides to utilize time travel to retrospect, prospect and introspect numerous significant moments in his entire life, as it seeks to face the painful and agonizing moments in the firebombing in Dresden and find his identity and life essence.

4. The absurdity of death

Billy says "so it goes" whenever he talks about the cruel events related to death, which expresses his pain, resignation, despair and insensitivity to the brutal war and death as well as the author's anxiety about the fate of mankind. Existentialism holds that "humans are born for no reason, perpetuate by weakness, and die by chance". Randomness can be found in the death of Billy and his family as well as millions of innocent civilians in Dresden. These inevitable deaths reveal the essence of life, which is accidental and absurd.

Billy accepts the concept of death on Tralfamadore that death means eternal existence. Due to the trauma left by this bloody fire-bombing in the war, Billy develops a desperate life philosophy, resignation and insensitive awareness of death, which makes Billy desolate and unable to integrate with others. Billy knows the exact time of his final death, but he waits peacefully for this moment to come, as the absurdity of life is unavoidable and the only thing he can do is to accept the result peacefully. Billy chooses to deceive himself to escape nausea and anxiety brought by free choice. However, everything loses its meaning in the face of death. His indifferent attitude towards death shows the absurdity and nothingness of the world and life. There is no mold about the essence of people in the world, so only when people fight with death does life have meaning.

5. Conclusion

This novel expresses the opposition between war and peace, life and death in the dislocation of time and space. Sartre believes that existence determines essence, and existence is absurd, but people can make free choices to take responsibility for themselves and all mankind, striving to regain human dignity and rebuild their own identity. As people on Tralfamadore tell us, we can choose to ignore the unhappy moment and cherish the happy moment. The human condition has both a dark side and a bright side of human nature, which is the hope for people living in nothingness. Humans must take proactive actions to contribute their strength to save the absurd and alienated world in an attempt to handle the absurdity of life and avoid conflicts and wars between people, thereby realizing a peaceful and free world.

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