The Escape from War

Kurt Vonnegut’s auto-biographical novel, *Slaughter-House 5*, based on his own war-time experience as a prisoner of war in the 2nd World War in 1944 portray, through the use of both reflective narration and elaborate diction, not only the atrocities of war but also continuous and unsuccessful attempts at evading war-time memories. Vonnegut experienced this barbaric nature of war during the historic Battle of the Bulge and the imprisonment of his infantry regiment in Dresden, the site of United States’ heaviest bombings. The anti-war sentiment developed by Vonnegut develops over these sentiments of an “Unnecessary” attack. The Royal Air Force and the US Army Air Force in 1944 employed firestorms to target entire cities. This “Terror Bombing” used incendiary bombs filled with combustible chemicals such as magnesium, phosphorus and napalm that when dropped would lead to the air above rising quickly and allowing for air from the surroundings to suck in. This vacuum based clearance of towns led to the death of more than 50,000 civilians residing in Dresden with only a handful remaining at the target site, among which was Kurt Vonnegut: not a physical victim of the bombings but an emotional victim of its effects. This bombing of Dresden, the use of 773 Avro Lancasters and 527 heavy bombers against a settlement that remained unguarded by anti-air guns and had been established as a military base, sparked controversy due to its unnecessity. Russians had marched to Berlin from the East and the Allies from the West, the Nazi German government, previously disinclined to surrender, was at the brink of devastation. An attempt at this scale has ignited similar questions over the morality in war and the loss of innocent life as observed in the Atomic bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The opposition to the realities of war and all that it entails for anyone involved led to Vonnegut’s exploration for writing as a means of communicating his own personal beliefs through use of imagery and realistic treatment of the facts through unforgettable descriptions. The anti-war theme is further developed by the inclusion of Billy
Pilgrim, the protagonist of Slaughter-House 5 and a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, who possess the ability to forget what he doesn’t want to know and to overlook what he has seen and experienced through the motif of escape in an imagination inspired world of science-fiction: a world that seems to make more sense to live in rather than the one created by mankind here on Earth. Vonnegut hopes to put the idea of a “Glorified” war to rest and prevent escape from reality as the only means of surviving in a post-war life.

Despite the novel’s protagonist’s lack of stance against war, Vonnegut is able to explore, through Slaughter House 5, the disbelief he possesses about war. The satirical idea that human-kind must put to rest the idea that war is glorious is emphasized continuously. The execution of Edgar Dergby, an average American soldier fallen victim to war not in battle but for a trivial war crime. The association of war as noble cause during which all inhuman actions are permitted but the mere act of theft is regarded as immoral. He is executed by a German firing squad in the wake of the bombing of Dresden that killed many thousands. The juxtaposition employed along with the elaborate description of Derby’s tombstone as a commemorative marker of this very ideology possessed by many war survivors is one where an apocalyptic world fails to recognize its true villains, “Everything was beautiful and Nothing hurt” (Vonnegut, 122). The inevitability of war as a glorious cause that sees many surrender their lives for causes believed to be noble is another aspect of battle that Vonnegut is forced into realization, “And even if the wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death” (10). The planned climax around the arrest of the American soldier who stole a teapot compared to the many who were killed demonstrates the author’s inability to come in accord with the morality of war that has surrounded this institution since medieval times, “The irony is so great! A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands are killed and then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins” (5) Vonnegut has come to the brutal realization that even writing an anti-war book would not prevent the likelihood of wars occurring in the future no matter how much elaborate detail is employed in the description of its brutalities, “What [Harrison Starr] mean, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were
as easy to stop as glaciers. I believed that, too” (3). The employment of “And so it goes” followed by every mention of death pushes forward the idea that there is not much one can do about death other than perceive it as an inevitable occurrence. Now, when I myself hear in plenty of other movements that somebody is dead. I simply shrug and say what the Transformadarians say about dead people” (27). Additionally, the vivid description of a post war Dresden, “There were to be no moon men at all” (185), to used to install the image that not a single soul had survived the above ground bombings. The entire city had been flattened into that pattern that resembled the craters of the moon, swept of all inhabitants.

Vonnegut is able to expand further in the anti-war sentiment by exploring the life after-war of Billy Pilgrim, the fictional character forced onto continuing living after all that he has already witnessed. Pilgrim comes across as a lone fighter and survivor of the war who is without help except from his past and future selves. He is pushed into the hallucinations and visits across time to rid himself of the reality of war and what is currently happening around him. He seeks to escape present to potentially find meaning about the very present he escapes by visiting the future. The Transformadarians, a segment of Billy’s own creation as a channel for escaping the reality, have taught him what he wants to believe deep down that “All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist… [Death] is an illusion” (26). Billy Pilgrim, despite having survived the pangs of living the war, continues to experience its traumas in the post WWII era, “He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows which moment of his life he is going to have to act in next” (30). At a party while watching the barbershop quartet, Billy is reminded of an event from war that has been engraved so deeply into his memory that when he listens to the song, the tragic bombing of Dresden is repeated in his mind. The American soldiers sang this quartet to distract themselves during their shelter underground from the disaster above ground. Billy is pulled away from the joyous event due to his constant recollections.

War is an eventuality but the inescapable trauma serves even worse. Mankind is left without guidance and can develop no sound reasoning to counter war’s effects, no one belief that would unite all the innocents and all the conquerors in search of power, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I
cannot change, courage to change that things I can, and wisdom to always tell the difference” (Vonnegut, 42). The reinvention of mankind is a gradual process sparked by small influences that must eventually crack all glaciers down.