

CREATING A PLANET: A NEW HISTORICAL STUDY ON SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE*

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Abstract

This research aims to focus on the narration in Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five by the help of New-Historicist point of view. It is worth noticing that Vonnegut wrote Billy Pilgrim's adventures by the help of his own experiences. That is why this work might be taken as fictional memoir and factual individual perspective. Whenever Billy Pilgrim remembers the things happened in Dresden it is seen that he sets out for Trafalmdore. Pilgrim uses the planet of Trafalmdore as a place to escape from the realities of the past. By creating a departure point from the brutal truths, Pilgrim finds himself in a relaxing imaginary place. So, it can be argued that Trafalmdore is used as a nest for a misfit. Vonnegut lowers the curtain of Trafalmdore to be able to underline the incidents happened in Dresden. Hence the more he softens the scenes of bloodshed, the easier it becomes to witness the death of the feelings.

Key Words: *New-Historicism, War, Trafalmdore, Dresden.*

BİR GEZEĞEN YARATMAK: MEZBAHA NO 5 ÜZERİNE YENİ TARİHSELÇİ BİR ÇALIŞMA

Özet

Bu çalışma Vonnegut'un Mezbaha No 5 romanındaki anlatımına Yeni Tarihselcilik yardımıyla odaklanmayı amaçlamaktadır. Şu dikkate değer ki Vonnegut, Billy Pilgrim'in maceralarını kendi deneyimleri sayesinde yazmıştır. Billy Pilgrim ne zaman Dresden'de olanları hatırlarsa, Trafalmdore'a seyahate çıktığı görülmektedir. Pilgrim Trafalmdore'u geçmişin gerçeklerinden kaçabileceği bir yer olarak kullanmaktadır. Acı gerçeklerden çıkış noktası yaratarak, Pilgrim kendisini rahatlatan hayali bir yerde bulur. Bu yüzden Trafalmdore'un bir uyumsuz için yuva olarak kullanıldığı tartışılabilir. Vonnegut Trafalmdore perdesini Dresden'de gerçekleşmiş olayların altını çizmek için indirmektedir. Bunun sonucu olarak, o ne kadar katliam sahnelerini yumuşatırsa, duyguların ölümüne tanıklık etmek de bir o kadar kolaylaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yeni Tarihselcilik, Savaş, Trafalmdore, Dresden.*

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The Bombing of Dresden is known for its devastating results. Although it was not a military region, Dresden was bombed to lower the hopes of German civilians. Kurt Vonnegut was one of the witnesses to this bombing as a surrendered American soldier in a slaughterhouse. By the help of his protected shelter he could survive the heavy bombing. Yet, the effects of the incident never let him be free from the memoirs. So, he transferred his experiences to Billy Pilgrim.

The protagonist of *Slaughterhouse Five* (1991), Billy Pilgrim creates a parallel universe for himself to get rid of the burden of the real world. In the course of the novel, the burden of war becomes heavier than Pilgrim can handle. Therefore, he makes up a planet named Tralfamadore and makes a journey to this interesting place. Actually, the situation of Pilgrim's having an alternative planet to live, shows that he requires a place where he can leave the past aside. By adding a delusional world, Tralfamadore, for his character, Vonnegut shows the only way for getting away from the burden of war, living in a non-existent world.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1991) has always been called a black humor (Farrell, 2008: 12). Its protagonist is Billy Pilgrim whose adventures are actually Kurt Vonnegut's fictionalized experiences in Dresden. The novel is set in the last days of the Second World War in Germany. The ironies and non-linear narrative of Vonnegut give a different place to *Slaughterhouse Five* in the history of the American Literature. Because of its importance for American Literature and its effect on the readers, *Slaughterhouse Five's* protagonist, Billy Pilgrim has a very unique position.

Throughout the novel, Billy Pilgrim experiences a series of striking incidents in the course of the Second World War which makes *Slaughterhouse Five* notable from the point of the New Historicism, too. Marjorie Levinson asserts that:

We want to articulate the literatures of the past in such a way as to accommodate the contingency of the present-the willfulness of our textual politics- and at the same time, to configure that freedom with the particular past that is retextualized. We want a framework that will explain the objective value of a belated criticism, one which reads into the work anticipations that we are not present in the text's contemporary life, only in its posthumous existence, an existence that turns around and plants itself in the past (1989: 22).

With the help of rereading of the texts on the past, the New Historicists think that present time can be understood. Yet, to achieve this there is a need of an objective point of view. To do so, historical texts, research documents and memoirs on the incidents must be reviewed carefully.

However, one of the most important air raids in the Second World War is Bombing of Dresden. Because of its horrifying nature, this air raid is still a debatable issue; so, nobody can mention the full certainty of the minor incidents. According to the New Historicist approach, the incidents took place in the past cannot be fully reachable. There is neither a universal truth, nor a sole data to be presented. Hence, each detail must be investigated mindfully. That is why Munslow points out that in *Deconstructing History* as follows:

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Finally, new historicist thinking suggests that our evidence and the written discourse we produce in interpreting it are time and place specific – there are no universal historical truths to be discovered or transcendental values to be elaborated (Munslow, 1997: 34).

With the written documents, memoirs and secondary sources, it is still possible to make some comments on the incidents in the Second World War collaterally with *Slaughterhouse Five*.

The protagonist of the novel, Pilgrim enlists in the army to fight against Germans. In the course of the war, he is captured by German soldiers and taken to an old slaughterhouse. After the Second World War, Pilgrim marries a girl named Valencia and starts working in an optometry clinic.

At some point of the novel, Pilgrim has a plane crash. After this incident he remembers the things that he did in the Second World War. All his recollections come after this accident. Therefore, it is fair to assume that by the help of the plane crash he enters in a delusional dream world. According to Pilgrim, he is kidnapped by aliens called Tralfamadorians.

He tells his experiences which include a fictitious time travel and visits to the planet of Tralfamadore. On the character of Billy Pilgrim, Sarah Fay notes as follows: “Billy witnesses the Bombing of Dresden, returns home safely but emotionally numb, marries a woman he does not love, has two children, and eventually becomes ‘unstuck in time’” (qtd. in Mustazza, 2010: 15).

All along the novel, the narrative changes. From time to time, Kurt Vonnegut

interrupts the narration and starts to give information on the details of the Second World War and his experiences. By creating such an impressive atmosphere Vonnegut aims to show a utopian-like world. Yet, from Pilgrim’s point of view, having a planet means escape from the horrifying images of the war.

In the planet of Tralfamadore, nobody thinks of preventing someone from thinking freely. Sarah Fay asserts: “And they don’t accept the concept of free will, the Notion that we can determine or even affect the course of our lives” (qtd. in Mustazza, 2010: 16).

Moreover, although Tralfamadorians know their fate, they do not try to interfere with the stream of the time. At one point Pilgrim wonders the reason of not intervening in the ending action of the planet:

“We know how the Universe ends,” said the guide, “and Earth has nothing to do with it, except that it gets wiped out, too.” “How-how does the Universe end?” said Billy. “We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears.” So it goes. “If you know [that the Universe will be destroyed by a Tralfamadorian pilot who presses a button],” said Billy, “isn’t there some way you can prevent it? Can’t you keep the pilot from pressing the button?” He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way” (Vonnegut, 1991: 55).

As the time passes by, Pilgrim is not anymore satisfied with the colorful, ridiculous atmosphere of Tralfamadore. Pilgrim starts to add his inner fantasies into that emergency exit. When Billy Pilgrim visits Tralfamadore, he meets an old porn star named Montana Wildhack and makes love with her. As this is a fantasy of Pilgrim, that does not make sense for others. That is why, whenever Pilgrim wants to tell his story to someone in real world, nobody takes him serious, even his own daughter. Hence, he is dragged to his solitude.

Indeed, as a victim of the air raid, Pilgrim suffers from being the only person who witnessed this disaster. For instance, when Dresden is bombed, the feelings and thoughts of Pilgrim become crucial.

Dresden has been the target of one of the most devastating bombings of all times (Biddle, 2008: 424). The Second World War was coming near to the end and the Allied forces wanted to overthrow Adolf Hitler as soon as possible. To do so, thinking Dresden as a military headquarter, Allied Forces operated a bombing on Dresden on 13-14 February 1945 (Biddle, 2008: 425). Actually, Dresden was far from being important from the point of the German army. On this issue David Irving asserts in *The Destruction of Dresden*:

In recognition of the city's lack of any obvious military significance, the Reich government had turned increasingly to Dresden as a haven for administrative departments and commercial offices, especially as the pressure from air attacks on Berlin became more severe during 1943. Typical of this trend was the decision to move the head office of the Berlin

Grossbank to Dresden with its entire staff. But even by February 1945 there was no sign that the Reich government itself would be transferred to the city, although with the fall of Berlin such a move might have been contemplated (1963: 77).

Dresden became a target because of its logistic importance. Actually Dresden was an unofficially open city which was attractive for the people who escaped from the fronts to save their lives.

The city's historical and artistic sides were also supporting the residents' idea that the city would not be shot by the enemies, because the city did not hold a power to assault, nor to threat. Tami Davis Biddle says in her essay *Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory*:

During the war, rumors circulated in Germany about the sanctity of the city due to its art and architecture; Dresdeners themselves did not seem to think that the city would draw the full wrath of the Anglo-American air forces. But there was a certain degree of self-delusion in this faith in immunity; it overlooked, for instance, the fact that much of Dresden's consumer-related industry had been converted to war-related industry. Dresden's biggest manufacturer, the lens and camera maker Zeiss-Ikon, made instruments vital to the war effort, including Luftwaffe bombsights. Seidel and Naumann, which had manufactured type writers and sewing machines, switched in wartime to the manufacture of armaments. These are two examples among many others.

And Dresden had not been spared up to that point: the Americans had waged two relatively light raids on targets in and around the city, in October 1944 and again in January 1945 (2008: 425).

David Irving emphasizes on the issue that Dresden's defense lines were so weak that it was not thought to be bombed by any Allied forces. According to Dresdeners and German authorities Dresden was safe enough to be a center to welcome the hospitalized people and refugees. Irving states in *Destruction of Dresden* as follows:

Throughout the middle years of the war, Dresden's Luftgau IV had stationed strong flak defenses around the city, but as the years passed without their springing into action more than twice, the authorities not unreasonably accepted that the guns were being wasted in Dresden, and dispersed them to the eastern front and the Ruhr. There thus arose the wide-spread but fatal legend of Dresden, the city that would never be bombed. On the one hand, the Dresdeners were reassured by the authorities' inaction on civil defense programs and by their relinquishing of the city's flak defenses; and on the other hand they had a pathetic confidence in the Allied governments respecting a city that housed ever increasing numbers of civilian hospitals and military dressing stations. Those people who could send their children to Dresden for safety. The Allies might bomb one of the more remote industrial suburbs; it was admitted, but never the city center (1963: 77).

Dresden was a special city in the history of Germany. On the other hand, it became a center to host the civilians unofficially. Because of these reasons, German authorities trusted the idea that Dresden is one of the safest cities in Germany during the Second World War.

From the New Historical point of view this information is important, because Kurt Vonnegut follows the path of commonly agreed history in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Yet, Vonnegut adds his own experiences to his work of fiction. By this way, *Slaughterhouse Five* becomes a fiction which is mixed with the facts.

Like Vonnegut, there were so many people who shared the similar experiences in the Bombing of Dresden. One of them is Angela Gill, who was 8 years old when Dresden was bombed. She witnessed the firestorm. In her memoir she says:

Suddenly the apartment house was shaking, bombs dropping all around us, and as we have been trained to do, we jumped into our "training suits" now called sweat suits, grabbed our rucksack (backpack which my mother made for us children in case we had to flee the Russian Army) and went into the basement with all the others from the apartment house. Bombs were dropping all around us; the house was shaking and vibrating. This lasted about half an hour. When we came out of the cellar, my mother as an air aid warden had to leave to help others whose houses were burning, ours was still standing but all the windows were blown out, and our curtains from the 2nd floor were hanging down to the street in strips.

Almost all the apartment houses in our neighborhood were completely engulfed in flames. I suddenly heard one siren sounding somewhere in the west from us (Angela's Story, 2003).

In her memoir, Angela Gill gives a personal record which has no significance in terms of official records, but her memoir justifies the incidents in *Slaughterhouse Five* mentioned by Vonnegut.

The Bombing of Dresden was heavily devastating for both the city and the people who were living there. Vonnegut asserts the Bombing of Dresden as follows:

Nobody talked much as the expedition crossed the moon. There was nothing appropriate to say. One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design. There were to be no moon men at all (1991: 160).

In this quotation Vonnegut creates an allegory for the Bombing of Dresden by giving information about Tralfamadorians. For Tralfamadorians everything should happen according to its fate. Moreover, nothing should interrupt the course of the incidents. So, Vonnegut criticizes the numbness of the fighter pilots who bombed Dresden.

The Bombing of Dresden changes Pilgrim's fate drastically. Before the bombing he is treated as a worker by the German soldiers. After the attack, everything becomes different for both the Dresdeners and captives. There is only one thing that does not change for Pilgrim. He continues to

work for the Germans, but as a corpse carrier this time:

Billy experiences personally the bankruptcy of the modern imagination: the fire-bombing of Dresden, destruction of a magnitude unequalled by anything during the Second World War, including the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. One hundred and thirty-five thousand people died in Dresden and eighty-three thousand in a similar bombing of Tokyo, while only seventy-one thousand people died at Hiroshima. The bombing of Dresden, that Billy survived because he was in a concrete slaughterhouse, turned the Florence of the Elbe into a cratered section of the moon's surface and gave Billy the rare opportunity of working afterwards in his first corpse mine. (May, 1972: 29)

Pilgrim is neither fit for the army nor is he mentally suitable to fight. So, when he is caught by Germans, he surprises the enemy by his sluggish appearance: "A German measured Billy's upper right arm with his thumb and forefinger, asked a companion what sort of an army would send a weakling like that to the front. They looked at other American bodies now, pointed out a lot more that were nearly as bad as Billy's" (Vonnegut, 1991: 40).

Billy Pilgrim is portrayed as a lonely weak man who is a misfit for the war conditions by Kurt Vonnegut. David Simmons says: "The fact that Billy becomes a chaplain's assistant rather than a soldier also makes him somewhat of a peripheral figure to the war" (qtd. in Mustazza, 2010: 67). It is clear that Billy Pilgrim is not suitable to be a fighter in a war.

Pilgrim experiences difficulties in the war. His captivation and the Bombing of Dresden never let him be mentally healthy even after the end of the war. When the war ends, Pilgrim tries to get back to his routines. Yet, he becomes “unstuck in time” (Vonnegut, 1991: 35), so the moments of hallucinations take the place of real world. That is why, the time shifts in *Slaughterhouse Five* occur so densely. In the novel, Vonnegut reverses time to deteriorate the meaning of searching the truth by showing the impossibility of reaching the reality in past:

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again. The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby (Vonnegut, 1991: 36).

These images are seen in the dream of Billy Pilgrim. He watches the incidents in the Second World War backwards in a hallucinated mood. When the sequence of the events in the Second World War is reversed, it is seen that everything becomes more positive and peaceful. Vonnegut achieves to turn each war element into a peacemaker instrument with a great irony. This includes the idea that everything can be

used for the good purposes if it is aimed; otherwise, it is not possible to reverse the time as it happens in the films or fictitious works.

Vonnegut’s irony also shows itself in the dream-like world of Tralfamadore. Whenever Billy Pilgrim remembers the things happened in Dresden it is seen that he sets out for Tralfamadore. Pilgrim uses the planet of Tralfamadore as a place to escape from the realities of the past.

The escape from reality to self-created utopia indicates the hopelessness of Billy Pilgrim. He fails to find a solution for his post-war trauma. In *Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five: The Requirements of Chaos*, Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl assert: “Billy is a man who can only solve his problems by saying that they are insoluble” (1978: 67). In addition to his depressed mood, he loses his wife and becomes a lonely man again. To overcome this situation he chooses to hide behind the imaginary world. Merrill and Scholl note:

Pilgrim may not literally be insane, but Vonnegut has undermined the reality of his experience on Tralfamadore. Indeed, the conclusion is irresistible that Pilgrim’s space and time travel are modes of escape. Surely it is not coincidental that Billy first time-travels just as he is about to lie down and die during the Battle of the Bulge, nor that he begins to speak of his trip to Tralfamadore after his airplane crash in 1968. He faced with the sheer horror of life, epitomized by the World War II and especially the fire-bombing of Dresden, Billy “escapes” to Tralfamadore (1978: 66).

By creating a channel to get away from the memoirs, Pilgrim opens a gate to a new fantasy world. Although he is not fully satisfied with the Tralfamadorians' point of view on time and life, he understands that he cannot change the past. Yet, disability of changing past does not prohibit enjoying the good moments of his escape.

For this reason, Vonnegut applies a different response to the bitter incidents in the novel. Whenever someone dies in the novel, it is said: "So it goes". With undermining the deaths of the characters, Vonnegut points out that an individual's death is not as important as a victory. Especially in the chapters which the Bombing of Dresden is told, Vonnegut uses the phrase "So it goes" repeatedly for not only civilian Germans, but also the captive American soldiers. So, it is inevitably clear that the phrase includes a criticism for American brutality.

Besides content, the structure of *Slaughterhouse Five* has striking features. The novel is furnished with the flashbacks and flash-forwards. Sarah Fay says:

The linear plot is abandoned as Billy zips into the past or whips ahead to

the future without warning. Reading it feels like being inside a pinball machine. And if time travel weren't enough, Vonnegut throws aliens into the mix (qtd. in Mustazza, 2010: 16).

From the New Historical point of view this information is important, because Kurt Vonnegut follows the path of commonly agreed history in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Yet, Vonnegut adds his own experiences into his work of fiction. By this way, the novel becomes a fiction which is mixed with the facts.

It is seen that *Slaughterhouse Five's* protagonist, Billy Pilgrim stands as an example of a lonely individual. Pilgrim's experiences on the front and his trauma after the Second World War show the devastating power of war. Even the survivors of the war carry the wounds of this experience psychologically. So, that does not have to be just a physical wound. It is clearly seen that Pilgrim's life and Tralfamadorians way of living are antipodes and the contrast of them underlines the decay of humanity and humane values.

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