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**Dehumanization and the Reduction of Human Identity to Mechanical  
Existence in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut**

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**Abstract**

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is one of the key texts of postmodern literature and trauma theory but behind the disjointed nature of the text and the science fiction of the ideas is a serious and shocking exploration of the mechanisation of human agency. This paper attempts to grasp the universal theme of dehumanization in this novel as a means of denying the value of the human identity in such a time of devastating violence in the World War II. The study, therefore, argues that Vonnegut shows modern warfare not only as a fight for ideology but also as an objectification process that mechanises free will as it systematically exterminates human lives in the Dresden bombing and through the character of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. The Military-Industrial Complex is dehumanizing the soldiers and the ordinary people are turning them into biological machines. In addition, this study shows the way in which Billy Pilgrim's understanding of Tralfamadorian determinism, that is, all moments are like "bugs in amber," is a psychological trick for internalizing this mechanization. In sum, the paper argues that Vonnegut's portrayal of humans as automata is an amateurish, humanist condemnation of mid-century industrial killing, suggesting that that which has been the biggest victim of contemporary warfare is the notion of human agency itself.

**Keywords:** Dehumanization, determinism, trauma theory, mechanization, military-industrial complex.

**Introduction:**

It is one of the main assumptions of the traditional war novel that all the events are attributable to man. The writer must provide the characters with the option to choose their destiny to make a story about courage, cowardice, or moral dilemma. Indeed, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an absolute denial of this. As a follower of Christ, Vonnegut understood from his first-hand experience of the firebombing of Dresden (1945) that the individual will was completely irrelevant in the atomic era of the twentieth century. As the mortality comes down from the heavens in the form of high-explosive and incendiary bombs in no particular order, the notion of the hero who chooses for oneself turns into a regrettable joke.

Thus, *Slaughterhouse-Five* isn't full of men of action, but rather institutional control. The optometrist Billy Pilgrim, a character in the novel who is extremely passive and unheroic, finds himself in a life "unstuck in time. People are viewed and treated as objects, cargo, or biological machines subject to powerful and impersonal forces throughout the text. The application of the motifs of determinism and mechanization, with which Vonnegut attempts to convey the tremendous dehumanization of the modern subject. The novel's main tragedy is the mechanization of human identity reviewed through the military and its treatment and care of the soldier's body, through alien Tralfamadorians and their fatalistic philosophy and through the mechanized linguistic repetition of the narrator, illustrating the industrial nature of the Dresden massacre. Vonnegut says it was not only the deaths that made the 20th century so terrifying, but the fact that the living were knowingly being reduced to the "replaceable, interchangeable gears of the great killing machine.

**Literature Review:**

It is especially *Slaughterhouse-Five* that is the subject of critical discussion, and which is concerned primarily with the psychological trauma that it depicts and the fragmentation of its structure. The multiple jumps in the novel are much more sharply characterized as episodes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by Susanne Vees-Gulani's deep exploration of the novel. Veas-Gulani argues that Billy's time traveling and contact with the Tralfamadorians are 'coping mechanisms' developed by a mind struggling to cope with the magnitude of the Dresden bombing (Vees-Gulani 176). Secondly, according to the psychological dimension of trauma, Cathy Caruth's basic theory, Unclaimed Experience, is about the cognitive mechanism in the brain of a trauma and the outcome of an event that hasn't been assimilated, which means that the survivor will find themselves reliving the same thing over and over again (Caruth 4).

The trauma theory explanation is adequate to address the fact that Billy's mind breaks, but we need to look at what sort of delusions Billy constructs. Then why is it that Billy's traumatized consciousness thinks that his whole world was without free will? This is what Lawrence R. Broer mentions in *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt*

Vonnegut, in which he states that Vonnegut's characters often turn to fatalistic philosophies as a way to shield themselves from the burden of guilt that accompanies their existence (86). The Tralfamadorians have the idea that nothing is wrong and that whatever has happened, has happened; which means Billy is not responsible for moral duties during the war.

Also, Robert T. Tally, Jr., speaks to the critique of the power of institutions in the U.S. in Vonnegut's works, where the individual is always outnumbered by bureaucracy and by the military force structures (Tally 52). To bring together these points of view, this paper brings forth Michel Foucault's theory of "docile bodies". Foucault in *Slaughterhouse-Five* talks about how power (e.g., military, prison) works directly on the body, "breaking it down," and striking it "of its former functions," such that it becomes "a compliant, mechanical apparatus" (Foucault 136). This paper uses an analytical perspective in which Foucault's notion of institutional mechanization interacts with Caruth's theory of trauma to show how Vonnegut's characterization of mechanical existence serves as a response to the military-industrial complex and as a portrayal of a traumatized psyche that has entirely abandoned the illusion of free will.

### **The Military-Industrial Complex and the "Docile Body"**

From his first steps in the European Theater of World War II, his loss of humanity is methodically explained. The soldier is a raw material of a big industrial unit: the military. Explicitly, the literary soldier denies Billy any dignity that he is usually accorded. He's an assistant chaplain, wearing no uniform, no boots and no weapon. He's said to be "a filthy flamingo bobbing passively behind enemy lines. He doesn't fight: he simply is flesh to be made into the meat of a combat machine.

The most obvious example of the mechanisation of man is where the artist represents the American prisoners of war being marched through Germany. The prisoners are squeezed into boxcars, which space transposes the prisoners into objects of transport. For the men, Vonnegut labels the trains "drawing rooms" because they are so crowded that they must take turns sleeping in each compartment. Mechanical and logistics problems are only considered in terms of food and waste intake and elimination. The train itself serves as a metaphor for deterministic momentum: the men are trapped inside boxcars, totally at the mercy of the tracks before them. These are not through free will, but through the physics of the locomotive to their destination.

Foucault's reference to the institutional power aiming "to make a docile body that can be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136) is a perfect description of how the military treated the soldiers. All the men's names, clothes and life stories are deleted. They are deloused, no-shave and get a number in the POW camp. Eradicating the individual identity is the precondition for war; the military has to regard the people it is fighting as not human if it is to do its work. If you assert yourself, if you show individuality in any way,

you're very brutally treated--and Billy is totally passive. He becomes a machine, a whole machine and learns how to survive.

### **Tralfamadorian Fatalism: The Universe as a Clockwork Trap**

Mechanical life is philosophically the climax of the subject, in the form of the unearthly species of the Tralfamadorians. Billy is abducted and brought to their planet, where he discovers their unique view of the fourth dimension. Tralfamadorians live in all the times. Time is a force that cannot be broken through; in their eyes, it will never change from what it is. Billy asks them why they have chosen to kidnap him and they won't play his game. As they explain, there's no "why"—only what is and they all become trapped in it like insects in amber.

This is a "bug in amber" metaphor and all the anti-creative aspects of man. Amber signifies the unyielding, uncaring, rigid nature of a deterministic cosmos—and motion, choice, and change are all impossible. The aliens notice that although they have visited many planets and people actually live there, Earth is the only planet where the idea of free will has ever been discussed as Billy attempts to have the discussion.

Vonnegut provides Billy with a means to understand the dehumanization that occurred in the war when he invents the Tralfamadorians for him. In a clockwork universe, every happening is predetermined; then the moral substance of the World War II events is taken away. Once it was that terrible, hideous war crime, the reflex of a complacent, competent elite, who used the boot of merciless hatred to justify their self-interest, in accordance with the advice of political advisers, and the complete obliteration of Dresden. It's in this philosophy that Billy's trauma resides, in the deepest of ways. Billy's mind creates a paradigm as he struggles to deal with the psychological shock of watching dozens of thousands get burnt to the ground: People are machines without the ability to change their destinies. All the characters are on a script and if everyone's on a script, then no one's to blame for the awful end to the script. Tralfamadorian fatalism is total defense, and nearly the abandonment of the concept of the human soul.

### **Billy Pilgrim as the Anti-Heroic Automaton**

Once the universe is mechanical, the one who's going around it has to be an institutional control; it makes sense. Billy Pilgrim is the opposite of a "classic" literary hero. He's low on agency, charisma, intelligence and looks. It's not him, it's the world. He is even compelled to go on his journey through time. He is "spastic in time" -- catapulted like lightning out of time, out of his own time, forward and backward, without warning and without control.

The lack of control is not a part of his wartime existence alone, but is also a part of his post-war existence as a civilian in America. But he's not marrying Valencia Merble out of love; it's the least resistance. His father-in-law's providing infrastructure makes him a wealthy optometrist. His life is made up of passively submitting to outside forces. When he

learns the exact date and how he will die, he does nothing to avoid this. He's as dutiful in his resignation as he is in getting in or out of the alien spacecraft or out of the German boxcar. Billy represents Vonnegut's attack on the belief of the rugged individualist in America. Following the war, America thoroughly put into place the image of the self-made semi-autonomous man—a pop culture icon embodied by men such as John Wayne. In this story of the culture, Vonnegut exposes a menace through his thoroughly helpless protagonist. The industrialized world is a large economy / mechanized army / it doesn't have the luxury of a free, individual man or the free, individual woman. Billy Pilgrim is the metaphor of the modern-day subject, a fragile biological construct on a conveyor belt, only moving towards its inevitable obsolescence.

### **The Eradication of the Body: Corpses, Commodities, and Dresden**

The most abhorrent example of dehumanization in the novel is seen during and just after the firebombing of Dresden. The human body is an object to be used in the war and after Dresden, even humanity has been turned into something unrecognizable. Superb film! Billy and the other prisoners come out of the underground meat locker, another powerful representation of the biological products, and are taken to the city trash heap to find dead bodies.

Vonnegut's portrayal of this pitiful labour is stark and chilling. The prisoners are working on "corpse mines. To reduce humans to commodities of raw materials, Vonnegut uses the language of industrial mining in describing the process of mining humans. Bodies in ruins are also not seen as fallen human beings but as an issue of requirements that need to be addressed: they decompose and get dirty. When too many bodies to bury, the military uses flamethrowers to burn the bodies where they fell. The firestorm is initially a weapon of war and then used as an industrial waste management tool.

What is particularly ridiculous is that the malt syrup manufactory remained even then. The plants that provide highly caloric syrup to pregnant women remain untouched, as do tens of thousands of humans. In the middle of the biggest mechanical slaughter in European history, the prisoners drink the syrup in secret and eat the factory of the biological machine; the products of the mechanical machine are eaten by the human machine. Vonnegut's most scathing in terms of 60's values, factories surviving human lives, is the side-by-side comparison of the syrup plant and the graveyard.

### **"So it goes": The Linguistic Mechanism of Apathy.**

The mechanical existence is not separated, even on the level of the character and the plot; it's a language theme throughout the novel. The narrator's refrain, "So it goes," to death in almost every scene is a mechanical and automatic response. It occurs over 100 times in the text and is consistently used after each of these occasions when death occurs.

It is the typewriter equivalent of a carriage return; it is a way of mechanically resetting the story beyond death, its own paralysing environs. It's equal when the champagne

bubble dissipates and the dog passes away and when a city is set on fire by thousands, all the moments become the same. This extreme flattening of language is evident in the complete inadequacy of language to deal with twentieth-century traumatic experience.

With the magnitude of industrialized slaughter, human empathy abates and language turns out to be a machine. Thus 'so it goes' becomes the voice of a traumatised psyche trying to get used to the mechanical aspects of death, without wanting to face the moral and emotional aspects of it. Through such rote and mechanised phrases, Vonnegut shows how the mechanisation of the body inevitably results in the mechanisation of the mind. An automated “crying” system is the only way the narrator can “grieve” for the available humans who are moving their own bodies in order to live on, so that the poor old narrator can continue his story.

**Conclusion:**

While creating in *Slaughterhouse-Five* a space-time universe in which the deepest victim of war is the notion of human control. Vonnegut uses the fatalistic determinism of the Tralfamadorians and the mechanical prose used to describe the results of Dresden to show how the cataclysmic violence of the century he lived in systematically crushes humans and turns them into mechanical beings. When the military-industrial complex is at work, it gives birth to the frustration of men's and women's self-determination; they are raw materials for an inhuman machine.

That's one way of reading the novel, though, and not the humanist project which Vonnegut actually embarked on. Describe the storyline of the human characters as being like ants in amber, as if captured, and ask why this is not an assertion of determinism, but rather is a statement of unsolvable trauma. Billy Pilgrim takes a journey into the philosophy of the machine when he can no longer tolerate human cruelties and suffering. Vonnegut's metafictional exposure of the depersonalization is a panicky cautionary tale. He bleaches our eyes to the horror of a cut-off world of no free will – he shows it to us. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an important, needed call-to-arms to stand up to the systems, institutions, and wars that try to turn us into something less human, to take back our control, our humanity, before we're all swallowed up by the machines we've built ourselves.

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