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Final Response Paper

PTSD/Shell Shock

Throughout the ages, every war has had a word describing the mental repercussions of wartime stress. In the novel Slaughterhouse Five, the time period called it shell shock which it is now called PTSD. This novel is a story telling a series of events that take place all in Billy Pilgrim’s head. One of the biggest questions for this novel is whether or not Billy is actually time traveling or is this all in his head? Throughout the novel, there are a lot of common motifs and threads that gives us insight to what is really happening. I think this gives a great argument to the fact that Billy is actually not time traveling but rather he is just actually imagining it all.

The most common theme throughout this book is that time and fate is predestined. There is no control over what will happen because it has already happened. In a scene when Billy Pilgrim is at a Lions meeting the narrator tells of a plaque on the wall saying, God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. This is usually a prayer for drug addicts and alcoholics, but I think the author used this as a way to solidify the point that things in your past cannot be changed. With Billy having been through war and multiple other traumatic events I think Billy has had a hard time dealing with his past.

One event that Billy had to endure was his father tossing him into the pool as a young child saying “It's sink-or-swim”. For a child, this is a very traumatic event to have happen. But this was not the only instance when Billy could have lost his sanity. He was also captured in war, bombed at Dresden, and survived a plane crash. A lot of these instances he was one of the sole survivors, which can cause a survivors guilt associated with an event. With Billy having so many occurrences with near death situations I think Billy has lost site of what is actually going on.

As with many people who have been through war, there are certain sounds, actions, and smells that can trigger a flashback. For Billy, I think that the barking dog is an example of a trigger for him. There are many instances where the author will, what seems like randomly, place the quote “somewhere in the distance a dog is barking”. This common thread seems to be one of Billy’s triggers. For example, when he was first captured in war there were germane scouts equipped with German Shepards. I think that at the sounds of a dog barking Billy can slip back into a flashback. I think this is why on so many occasions Billy will have a dog barking in the distance. In most instances of Billy’s flashbacks, they all seem to revolve around the war in general. This is where Billy had his first instance of “being unstuck in time”. I think this is due to the fact that he is trying to “accept the things he cannot change” in his past. Because his past is unchangeable and still bothers Billy his mind has created a way to deal with this stress.

Billy’s mind has created what he calls the Tralfamadorians. The Tralfamadorians are an alien species with a specific philosophy of “so it goes”. This philosophy makes it easier for hi to come to grips with the fact that he cannot change his life. His past has been filled with death and sorrow. Everyone around him has died in strange ways unexpectedly, like his father who died in a hunting accident, or his wife. Some people would argue that it is possible that the Tralfamadorians could actually be real. Because he has the ability to see his own death, and future event. This could be true but there are a few clues left by the author in order to give a hint to the fact that Billy is just actually suffering from a PTSD-like symptom.

One instance where the narrator gives us a hint of the truth is when Billy is in New York. While Billy is in New York he sees a headline about the actress Montana Wildhack, whom he supposedly is with on a foreign planet. This may not seem like anything besides the fact that the passage goes on to say “He knew where Montana Wildhack really was, of course. She was back on Tralfamadore, taking care of the baby, but the magazine, which was called Midnight Pussycats, promises that she was wearing a cement overcoat under thirty fathoms of salt water in San Pedro Bay” (p. 204) This shows that even though he sees the reality of the situation he will sometimes slip back into delusion which is another sign that these Tralfamadorians are made up in his head. In another instance highlighted was when he traveled in a “time warp” to the planet where he could stay for a year. “He said he had been kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians on the night of his daughter’s wedding. He hadn’t been missed, he said, because the Tralfamadorians had taken him through a time warp so that he could be on Tralfamadore for years, and still be away from Earth for only a microsecond”(p. 26). In reality, he did miss his daughter's wedding which means that this instance of the wedding proves without a doubt that he really isn't traveling.

The last most important instance of the Tralfamadorians being something that Billy had created to cope with his trauma is that he had actually read a book fews years back. There was a book that Billy had read a few years back that seemed to exactly match the story of him and Montana Wildhack being on the alien planet. “He got a few paragraphs into it, and then he realized that he had read it before—years ago, in the veterans’ hospital. It was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212” (p. 201). This is exactly what happens to Billy and his crush Montana Wildhack. I think this is a case where Billy is creating an alternate reality because he is unhappy with his life. Schizophrenia can be caused by, in some cases, trauma, and/or trying to escape reality by creating imaginary scenarios constantly. I truly am hard to say whether Billy is Schizophrenic or not but it is very apparent that there is some type of emotional and mental issues he is experiencing.

It also could be argued that he is time traveling as well. Although I do not think he really is time traveling, it could be argued that he really is. Billy in one case predicted that he would be in a plane accident before he had taken off the runway. In another passage, it seems that the author/narrator wants you to battle over thinking Billy is insane or that he is actual time traveling. “Billy was unconscious for two days after that, and he dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel.”. In this passage, it seems that the true things were time travel which up to this point in chapter 7 doesn't seem to be the case. I think it's left up to the reader in order to conclude.

The reader is often left believing both sometimes simultaneously. For example in the passage when Billy is in the hospital the patient next to him just so happens to be an expert in historical wars. “Word of honor,' said Billy Pilgrim. 'Do you believe me?' 'Must we talk about it now?' said Rumfoord. He had heard. He didn't believe. 'We don't ever have to talk about it,' said Billy. 'I just want you to know: I was there.’”. At first, Rumford did not believe him and said basically he was insane, which leaves you thinking it is impossible for him to have been there. Only a few passages later Rumfoord entertains the possibility that Billy could have been there. It's almost as if the author wants us to be lost just as Billy is lost in his own mind, not knowing what is really and what is fake. This writing style seems to do a good job of being able to identify with someone at war.

I think this style of writing is the reason to why in the beginning of the novel there was an explanation to what it would actually be like to read the novel. It's very apparent that even Vonnegut had some trouble writing this type of novel, as he goes on to say that is not easy to tell a war story. I think this is due to the difficulty in remembering such traumatizing things and expressing them in a straightforward way.

Whether its called PTSD or shell shock, there clearly is a effect on the people who suffer from it. It is clearly seen that Billy Pilgrim has been through a lot of traumatic instances throughout his life. Sometimes its impossible to tell when reading the novel but it is apparent that he is clearly experiencing something during war and for a while after words. It clearly can be true that he has experienced a alien abduction but instead he used it as a coping mechanism. The uncertainty is related to his reality and where its starts and where it begins.