

Disability as a Metaphor: An Analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Abstract

The concept of normalcy has become a topic of constant debate over the past few decades. The notion of being normal is always stated simultaneously with terms like impairment and disability. Though the term impairment is considered to be the defacement of the mind or body of the individual, disability is understood as a social construct. In ancient times, disabled people were looked upon as sinners. It took many years for them to find themselves represented in literature. At first, these people were represented merely for entertainment purposes. Due to the impact of the writings of eminent literary personalities on disabled people and the civil rights movement, these people occupied a prominent position in social programmes as well as in literature. Along with the major writers of the postmodern era, Kurt Vonnegut, an eminent American novelist and satirist, employed a non-heroic and mentally disabled Billy Pilgrim as the protagonist of his masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-Five*. By doing so, he attempts to challenge the conventional hero concept as well as expose the trauma these kinds of people face in a society of able-bodied supremacy.

Keywords: Disability, Normalcy, Impairment, Able-bodied supremacy, Trauma.

1. Introduction

Disability studies as an academic discipline relate to the nature, meaning, and consequences of disability. Being an interdisciplinary approach, it analyses disability as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon and focuses on the interaction between disabled individuals and society. The social and cultural values of society have a deep impact on its attitude toward disabled people. In ancient times, disability was seen as a medical condition that needs treatment. Individuals with disability were abused and were considered as 'others' in society. The critical disability studies that emerged during the late twentieth century introduced various approaches and methodologies to the analysis of disability and thereby expanded this field.

The early literary works depicted the ways in which disabled people were treated brutally as they were considered to be evil and cursed individuals. The representation of the pathetic condition of these individuals bears witness to the fact that they were represented merely for entertainment purposes. It is only during the eighteenth century that there occurred a change in the attitude of society toward these disabled groups, and thereby they find a better position in society. The nineteenth century witnessed dramatic changes in the attitude toward disabled people as there appeared at least one disabled character in the writings of the eminent literary personalities of the time. But here too, these writers focused more

on the difficulties of the caretakers of disabled people rather than the condition of the disabled individuals themselves.

Literature of the modern age explicated an uncourageous view on the representation of disability. Many disabled writers came to the forefront with their literary works and illustrated their difficult life journey and how they emerged victorious from their struggles. Even later, the late modernist and postmodernist fictional writers incorporated disabled individuals as significant characters in their works. The writers like Kurt Vonnegut began to create plots that include non-heroic and mentally insane protagonists like Billy Pilgrim, Dwayne Hoover, and many others.

Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is socially stigmatized as a disabled individual. He fits into the classification of disability according to the social model as well as the medical model. In earlier narrative forms like the epic, the main characters are portrayed as noble and heroic. When it comes to later forms of the novel, like the novels of the nineteenth century, the characters are ordinary people who are put in abnormal circumstances. Even if disability appears in a novel, it is unusual for a central character to be a person with disability. These novels might depict physically deformed minor characters or villains. This proves that the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her. This normativity in turn creates the abnormal or the other.

The implications of the hegemony of normalcy are profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production. The novel form is intricately connected with concepts of the norm. From the typicality of the central character, to the normalizing devices of plot to bring deviant characters back into the norms of society, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel disbursts notions of normalcy. Characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning, as are moments of disease or accident that transform such characters. As theorist Lennard J. Davis notes regarding the construction of cultural standards: "To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study... But... the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (13).

One of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal. Along with this, there are writers in the postmodern era who are not simply trying to include disability under the rubric of normal but to question the idea of normality, and to expand the definition of disability.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut employs disability as a device of representation through the portrayal of an inane and insane protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Billy, who has "come unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 25), swings to and fro through the events of his life, past and future. His disability becomes crucial to the function of the narrative as the novel is all about the post-traumatic experience of Billy Pilgrim. The aftereffects of the Second World War, Billy's difficulty to accept reality, and the means by which he tries to escape the trauma by time travel make up the whole novel.

Vonnegut depicts Billy as a "...crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality and analytical insight" (Mitchell & Snyder 49). Billy Pilgrim is depicted

as a witness as well as a victim of the aftermath of the Second World War. He lacks all the conventional characteristics of a hero as he is portrayed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He is too weak to be an active character in the novel as he suffers from the mental trauma that he experienced as a soldier in the Second World War. The terrible experiences he had during his tenure as a soldier send him out of time, and he seems to have experienced his own death many years before it happens. Billy's uncertainty regarding the impending events in his life is obvious in the statement: "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next...he is in a constant state of stage fright...because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (Vonnegut 26).

By presenting his protagonist as a passive and vulnerable character, Vonnegut tries to subvert the traditional notions of a hero and also emphasizes the deep impact of war on individuals. This "...systematic displacement of linear narrative expectations directly mirrors contemporary assessments of the text's schizophrenic temporal structure, which critically exposes how institutional frameworks enforce rigid, non-accommodating chronologies upon marginalized individuals" (Barrows 398).

The physical appearance of Billy during his childhood too deviates from the so-called normal hero concept. Vonnegut describes him as "...a funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth-tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola" (Vonnegut 26). He then joined the Ilium School of Optometry before joining military service during the Second World War. After being discharged from the Army, he is said to have suffered a mild nervous collapse. He was treated in a veteran's hospital and underwent several shock treatments before he was released. In addition to this, Billy happened to be the only survivor in a plane crash in 1968. All these events had a serious impact on him through the rest of his life.

Billy is an odd-looking optometry student before he enrolls in the military. He is sent to fight against the Germans and is eventually captured by the German troops. Despite being feckless with his weak physique and constant nightmares, he somehow survives where others don't. He even manages to escape the Dresden bombing, one of the worst atrocities of the war. He believes that he became unstuck in time sometimes in 1944. He is nervous and unstuck all the time that he never knows which part of life he is going to perform next. It is to explain the random movements of Billy in time that the author introduced the life of the creatures in an alien planet called Tralfamadorians, who move to and fro in time without a definite beginning and end.

Disability stands as a metaphor to the body's resistance to normalcy. In the novel, Billy's disability and his conduct stand as a resistance to the so-called normal way of life. Through the depiction of the mentally insane protagonist, Kurt Vonnegut too challenges the notion of the conventional hero figure. In addition to this, Kurt Vonnegut incorporates several narrative strategies like temporal shifts, spatial distortions, different levels of narration, and many others in order to challenge the notion of normalcy and to expose the oppression that disabled people face in a society dominated by able-bodied men.

The novel depicts several instances where Billy exhibits the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. One such instance is when he falls asleep in a boxcar in Germany on the way to a POW camp. In between his nightmares, he wakes up on hearing a siren and jumps up and worries that World War III is coming. He relives the horrible experiences he suffered in the past, which is another symptom of post-

traumatic stress disorder. His passivity, numbness, and exhaustion are all symptoms of his mental disorder.

The novel disables normative assumptions about the body and its functions through the depiction of the mentally insane protagonist Billy Pilgrim. Billy Pilgrim exhibits symptoms of intense psychological trauma. The recurrent memories of past events, time travels, and his experience of the alien planet called Tralfamadorians are all results of his mental insanity. The traumatic events like the experience as a soldier in the Second World War, the treatment that he received from the fellow soldiers, his experience as a prisoner of war, the way he was treated by the German soldiers, the plane crash, and the death of his wife due to carbon monoxide poisoning influence Billy's life as well as the way he responds to life and death.

The novel provides ample evidence regarding the impairments and restrictions that affect a person's participation in life. Being considered crazy, both his family and society discard him. For instance, during the marriage of his daughter, Billy withdraws into the darkness of his house and dreams of his time travels on Tralfamadore: "Billy now shuffled down his upstairs hallway knowing he was about to be kidnapped by a flying saucer...Billy looked at the clock on the gas stove. He had an hour to kill before the saucer came...he came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again" (Vonnegut 68-69).

The able-bodied society considers people with disabilities as weak and vulnerable without much agency of their own. They consider disability as one aspect of a person's identity—like race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Disability results from a mismatch between the disabled person and the physical and social environment. Billy in the novel does not match with the social and political environment around him. He is really concerned about the harsh realities of life and therefore tries to escape into a different planet. The result of this is the time travels.

From the earlier period, normality came to hold a powerful sway over our mind and body. The stigma associated with disabled individuals makes them discredited by others (Goffman, 1963). The moments of interaction between the so-called normal people and stigmatized disabled individuals are quite an interesting area of study. After the airplane crash, Billy remained in his house with a housekeeper. One day without any warning, he went out of the house and got on an all-night radio program devoted to talk and told about having come unstuck in time. He said he was taken to Tralfamadore where he was displayed naked in a zoo. On hearing about this, his daughter Barbara was upset. They went down to New York and brought Billy home. Though Billy said that he had been kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians, his daughter and her husband believed all this was untrue and that he had become insane.

Writers like Vonnegut consider disability as an essential component of storytelling, especially when it comes to the description of the traumatic experiences of the Second World War. Vonnegut describes his challenges in writing such a war book as: "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money, anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden...But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then-not enough of them to make a book anyway" (Vonnegut 8).

Disabled people, as a matter of course, encounter bias in the encounters of everyday life—sexuality and dating, education, and employment where micro-aggressions and discriminations fleetingly appear in a glance, a phrase, or much worse. Billy behaves indifferently. One such instance is when Billy's wife asks him the time and he doesn't know. So he says "...Search Me" (Vonnegut 12). Another instance is when Billy went to his friend's house and stayed there to get some information about the war. His friend's wife Mary didn't like his presence. About this Billy says: "It was only after the children were gone that I sensed that Mary didn't like me or didn't like something about the night. She was polite, but chilly" (Vonnegut 17).

Disability is not only accepted but also has become a critical term in discussions of being, posthumanism, political theory, transgender theory, philosophy, and the like. Understanding how and why we think of something as normal is an important part of understanding the disabled body. It is observed that the problem of disability does not lie with the person with disabilities but rather in the way that normalcy is constructed.

The concept of the norm is actually a reaction against the concept of the ideal body. It implies that the majority of the population should be part of the norm. People are considered deviant if their bodies don't match with the norm. If this happens, people are identified by their physical qualities. In a society where the concept of norm is operative, then disabled people are considered deviants.

The novel portrays Billy as a deviant who lives in the midst of so-called normal people—who are not deviants. The very first line of the novel provides evidence to his deviant behavior: "Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 26). Vonnegut describes Billy as a deviant who is: "...spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next....He is in a constant state of stage fright...because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (Vonnegut 26).

Take Karl Pearson, a leading figure in the eugenics movement, defined the term unfit as: "the habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculous, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic, diseased from birth or from excess" (33). Here Billy is portrayed as unfit both as a soldier as well as in his professional field—optometry. Vonnegut confirms that Billy suffered "...a mild nervous collapse" (Vonnegut 27) and was treated in a veteran's hospital where he was given shock treatments during his final year in the Ilium School of Optometry.

Vonnegut questions the idea of normality through the portrayal of Billy as a person who became "...unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 28) and who "...had been kidnapped in a flying saucer" (Vonnegut 28) by the Tralfamadorians. Billy believed that "...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" (Vonnegut 28). Billy embodies a rejection of typical human agency. Billy's experiences—his passive demeanor, his seeming inability to fit societal expectations, and his encounters with the Tralfamadorians—challenge the conventional notions of what it means to be normal.

Billy's passive demeanor embodies a rejection of typical human agency. This passivity contrasts sharply with societal ideals of ambition and self-determination, questioning whether striving for such ideals is normal or even necessary. His alienation and his inability to fit societal expectations is evident in his inability to relate to people around him. His marriage, career as an optometrist, and life in Ilium are

conventional on the surface but lack emotional depth. His disinterest in these roles critiques the hollowness of societal definitions of normal success and happiness.

Billy embraces the Tralfamadorian view of time and free will. From these aliens, Billy learned: “All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist...They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them” (Vonnegut 29). This view contrasts with human beliefs about progress, responsibility, and control. Billy’s embrace of this philosophy makes him seem abnormal to others, yet it raises questions about whether these human constructs are themselves absurd.

Billy experiences post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental condition triggered by his experiences as a soldier during the Second World War. The deeply traumatic events during the war led to severe lingering distress that disrupted his daily life. His nervous collapse after his traumatic experiences was interpreted as abnormal behavior rather than acknowledging the severe experiences that he went through. His strange behavior and his visions were indeed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Vonnegut uses Billy as a lens to question the idea that one must conform to societal norms to be normal. Billy’s visions, including his travel experiences, challenge societal expectations and the need to conform to societal norms. Through Billy, Vonnegut portrays normality as a fragile, arbitrary construct, suggesting that deviation from it may be more genuine or honest than adherence to it.

Vonnegut challenges the idea of normalcy by introducing a protagonist who contrasts with the societal expectations of heroism in war. Billy joined as a chaplain’s assistant in the Second World War. “A chaplain’s assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends” (Vonnegut 40).

Instead of being celebrated as a typical war hero, Billy is depicted as ineffectual and bewildered, challenging the glorification of war and its alignment with societal norms. The way Billy goes to the war is interesting. Billy Pilgrim came: “...empty handed, bleakly ready for death. Billy was preposterous-six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon and no boots...He didn’t look like a soldier at all, He looked like a filthy flamingo” (Vonnegut 34). This type of unconventional characterization questions the societal obsession with heroism as a normal trait in protagonists.

Billy rejects the social pressure to conform to the norms even in his relationships. Though he lives a stereotypically normal life, he is disinterested in these aspects. After the airplane crash, Billy lost his interest in his business. So his daughter Barbara and her husband had to look after Billy’s business. The conventional ideals of cause and effect are challenged by Billy’s time travel experiences. Billy observes: “The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist” (Vonnegut 29). By rejecting the normal progression of time, Vonnegut questions whether linearity itself is a valid or necessary framework for understanding human life.

Billy's Tralfamadorian stories and hallucinations are often misunderstood and are considered delusions by those around him. Billy is considered mentally ill when he says: "It is just an illusion we have here on earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever" (Vonnegut 29).

Billy believed that he was providing comfort to so many people with the truth about time. But society as well as his own family considered him senile. His daughter Barbara thought he was senile because of the damage caused to his brain in the airplane crash. At the same time, Billy was trying to persuade Barbara and others to believe that he was far from senile and he was devoting himself to something better than the business.

Even society as well as family ostracizes individuals who deviate from its norms. Billy's acceptance of being placed in an alien zoo, where he is observed as an exotic specimen, mirrors societal tendencies to objectify those who are different. "He was forty years old, on display under a geodesic dome...He was naked. The Tralfamadorians were interested in his body-all of it. There were thousands of them outside, holding up their little hands so that their eyes could see him" (Vonnegut 102). Vonnegut uses this absurd scenario to comment on how society views deviations from the norm as curiosities rather than valid forms of existence.

Billy's detachment at the death of his wife out of carbon monoxide poisoning, the death of his father, and his Dresden experience challenges social expectations. He, being a soldier and a war veteran, is not supposed to behave in such an indifferent manner. After reporting the death of each of them, he takes it as a usual and ordinary incident for which people think that he is crazy. The reason for this detachment might be the survival experiences at Dresden that left him unable to reconcile his past with the present. His fragmented psyche is the result of the absurdities of the war itself.

Vonnegut amplifies his critique of normality by introducing narrative strategies like a satirical tone and dark humor. He frames Billy's deviant experiences in a satirical light and thereby challenges societal norms. His disoriented existence reflects the cultural disillusionment of the post-World War II era. Vonnegut analyses how society burdens individuals like Billy to reintegrate and adapt, ignoring the deep wounds left by war.

Despite all these troubles, Billy's survival and acceptance of life's absurdities suggest that normality is less about conformity and more about finding personal meaning in a chaotic world. In all these various ways, Vonnegut dismantles traditional notions of normality, presenting it as a construct shaped by societal expectations rather than a universal truth. Vonnegut's nuanced portrayal of disability in *Slaughterhouse-Five* ultimately serves as a critique of societal values, highlighting the ways in which war, trauma, and societal norms contribute to both the creation and marginalization of disabled individuals

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