

**Not All Untruths Are Harmless:
Minor Characters' Narratives in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five***

One of the major debates concerning Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* centers around the importance of Tralfamadore. If those sections of the novel that relate to Tralfamadore or Tralfamadorians are Billy Pilgrim's delusions, then critics and readers have to decide what role those delusions are playing. One reading is that Billy's creation of Tralfamadore is a coping mechanism, a beneficial practice to help him process the horrors of the bombing of Dresden. One can go even further and argue that Vonnegut mirrors Billy, in that Vonnegut creates the story of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as his way of coping with Dresden in the same way that Billy creates Tralfamadore. However, the other dominant critical interpretation is to see anything related to Tralfamadore as Billy's means of escape, not coping, leading to an implied critique of quietism. I agree with those critics who see Billy's creation of Tralfamadore as escapist and as critiquing quietism. While most critics focus solely on Billy in making this argument, my intention here is to broaden out that idea of escapism, as Vonnegut uses a number of other characters from the novel to show how they, too, use stories as escape, not as ways of putting forth realistic or healthy ways of dealing with the world. Vonnegut not only wants us to see that Billy's escapist fantasy of Tralfamadore is harmful, but that there are other stories that can damage humanity, the opposite of the *foma* he believes also exist.

Vonnegut laid out his idea of *foma* in *Cat's Cradle*, of course, but it is his comments in speeches and interviews that most clearly illustrate this idea of harmless untruths. In his interview with *Playboy* magazine in July 1973, the interviewer asked him, "What are some examples of lies you like?" He responded, "'Thou shalt not kill.' That's a good lie. Whether God said it or not, it's still a perfectly good lie" ("*Playboy*" 240). The implication here is that there are lies that can cause harm, such as a lie that leads people to kill. One of the most famous

quotes from Vonnegut that shows he is interested in the power of stories, how bad ones can lead us to perform harmful actions, while *foma* can lead us toward a better world comes from his “Address to Graduating Class at Bennington College, 1970”: “Only in superstition is there hope. If you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash. I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I’m sorry—I have to undo that now. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty” (163). He knows that such a belief may turn out to be fruitless, but he also believes that such harmless untruths will make the world a better place. In laying out this idea, though, he is clearly arguing against the harmful untruth that humanity doesn’t matter, that a scientific or materialist view of the world will cause great amounts of suffering for humanity. Thus, he lays out his *foma* to counter that harmful untruth. In the same way that Billy Pilgrim believes a harmful untruth through his creation of Tralfamadore, leading him to ignore (not process) his experiences in Dresden, a number of minor characters, specifically Edgar Derby, the British soldiers, and Valencia Pilgrim, create stories of their lives that are harmful to themselves and to others around them.

Beyond using soldiers, such as Roland Weary and Paul Lazzaro, to illustrate the harmful untruths people tell themselves, he also shows someone much more stable in Edgar Derby. Vonnegut refers to Derby more than any of the other soldiers, as he references him in the first chapter, believing his death should be the climax of the novel. Derby seemingly serves to mock the unthinking patriotism that often leads countries, especially America, into war; thus, as with Weary’s Three Musketeers’ leading young men into war, Derby’s delusions about patriotism can

have the same effect. Peter Kunze focuses on Derby's speech to Howard W. Campbell when he writes, "Derby transcends his confinement as a 'listless plaything' to become a character, in Vonnegut's mind. But his impassioned speech—a rebuttal that asserts his masculinity, righteousness, and purpose—is interrupted by the moans of the air-raid sirens" (51). While Kunze is correct in that Derby does, in fact, stand up to Campbell and lay out the *foma* of America (the ideas of equality, freedom, and justice), his speech about those ideals are undercut by the interruption of the reality of America's actions. As he is attempting to defend America by speaking about "the American form of government, with freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all" (209), American planes are approaching Dresden where they will bomb an unprotected city made up of civilians and prisoners of war. Clearly, "fair play" does not apply during a war.

Not only is Derby's speech cut off and Derby is executed for stealing a teapot, but Derby's letters to his wife show that he has created a story of the war in the same way that Billy creates the Tralfamadorians. He reshapes the election to make it seem that the soldiers admire him when the reality is that they were indifferent, at best. More importantly, though, he imagines writing to his wife: "We are leaving for Dresden today. Don't worry. It will never be bombed. It is an open city" (188). In the same way that Derby is unwilling to see how the other soldiers feel about him and his leadership, he is also unwilling to see that, in such a war, horrific attacks can and do happen. In fact, they have been and will be perpetrated by the country he loves. It is no coincidence that Derby is reading Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* while sitting with Billy, as Derby accepts the traditional war narrative in a way other characters don't, making him like Henry Fleming, whom others perceive to be brave. In Derby's case, though, he tells himself and his wife a story about himself and his country that is untrue, even though he

speaks well of the *foma* of America. Ultimately, such stories about America and war simply lead to more young (and old) men who want nothing more than to fight for the supposed ideals of America.

Vonnegut does not limit his criticism to America, as the English soldiers who welcome Derby and the other Americans to their camp also tell themselves stories about war that cause divisions between those who should be friends. Since the English soldiers have not truly seen the war, they are blind to the realities the American soldiers have endured. In fact, the English soldiers “were so elated by their own hospitality, and by all the goodies waiting inside, that they did not take a good look at their guests while they sang. And they imagined that they were singing to fellow officers fresh from the fray” (121). Because they believe in the war as they did when they first began, they are unable to see any other reality, unable, even to see the reality of the American soldiers right in front of them. In fact, these English soldiers make “war look stylish and reasonable and fun” (120), which is why the Germans are so fond of them. The English soldiers deny the reality of the war, so the Germans can do so, as well, leading them to continue to believe that their cause is just. Kunze tries to explain away the English soldiers’ behavior: “Their humanity shines through their charity and fraternity in comparison to the Germans, who though equally broken and battered, continue to wage the war” (50). However, the English soldiers are not broken and battered, as the Germans are, having avoided the entire war; instead, they live in a fantasy world of what the war was like, only having that fiction dismantled when the Americans show up. While they originally meet the Americans with charity and fraternity, they quickly give up those ideals when the Americans do not live up to the English soldiers’ image of them, even literally drawing a line in the sand to keep them separated.

The British soldiers are unable to cope with a different narrative of the war and the young men who are fighting it. Christina Jarvis, in “The Vietnamization of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” sees another connection to the British soldiers’ telling themselves stories: “Although the English men are themselves rendered absurd in their Cinderella costumes and half battle-half croquet dress, they clearly embody pre-World War I ideals. They even have *The Red Badge of Courage* in their library for authenticity” (98). Jarvis continues, “Through this quote [about how the Germans adore the Englishmen] Vonnegut once again reveals the power of self-generating war fictions. The Englishmen perform gallant war roles from the past while simultaneously creating new ones for future wars” (98). Vonnegut’s connection of the Englishmen to Cinderella shows that they are living out a fairy tale version of the war, believing that everyone who comes to fight in wars are turned into soldiers, much as her fairy godmother changes Cinderella into a potential wife for a prince. Since they have not seen much of the war, they have created a war in their minds, telling themselves a story that doesn’t connect to the realities of the American soldiers (both in terms of who they are and what they have experienced). Similarly, they haven’t learned the lesson of Crane’s novel, as he, like Vonnegut, does not portray war as heroic. Instead, he shows Henry Fleming, who runs away from the war after receiving a wound, only to have his fellow soldiers treat him as a hero. The British soldiers believe Jerry is making a fool of Billy while their views of the war are more foolish than anything the Germans could do to Billy.

Vonnegut does not limit himself to using other soldiers to show the harmful untruths characters tell themselves; he also draws on Billy’s domestic life, using the important female characters in his life and the stories they tell themselves. The woman who makes the most frequent appearance and has the strongest connection to Billy’s war experiences is Valencia, his

wife. On the surface, Valencia's narratives appear harmless, another example of *foma* in Vonnegut's work. Charles B. Harris argues, in "Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*," that the narrator clearly distinguishes between time travel and imagination, as Harris argues that Billy does, in fact, travel through time. To illustrate his point, he uses Valencia as an example, as she does have imagination, but she does not travel in time. His point is valid, as Vonnegut clearly writes, "Valencia wasn't a time-traveler, but she did have a lively imagination. While Billy was making love to her, she imagined that she was a famous woman in history. She was being Queen Elizabeth the First of England, and Billy was supposedly Christopher Columbus" (151). She simply tells stories to provide fantasies that make her mundane life more interesting, to provide her (and possibly Billy) a more enjoyable sex life.

Her comments about weight loss are a bit more problematic, though, as she clearly has accepted society's narrative about beauty. William Rodney Allen argues in *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut* that "Valencia is a parody of consumerism, since she constantly consumes candy bars while making empty promises to lose weight in order to please Billy sexually" (91-92). Valencia believes the story that one must be thin in order to be both sexually attractive and sexually adept, which might be why she also imagines herself to be someone else during sex. Even this narrative, though, might simply be harmful to her, as her continually eating candy bars while accepting society's beauty standards have no obvious effect on Billy or even her daughter Barbara. However, such a narrative is harmful to her, as she forgives Billy's infidelity, even though she could have divorced him and taken a significant part of their money. She does not believe she is beautiful, though, so she stays with a man who does not seem to have much to offer her because she does not believe she is beautiful.

The most troubling story Valencia accepts, though, is the standard view of war and masculinity. Such views influence Valencia's worldview as much as they do those of the soldiers. Jarvis writes, "After consummating their marriage, Valencia asks Billy to tell her his war stories. . . . because her expectations and associations are constructed by war films and books" (101). She, like so many other people, believe war is glamorous and sexy, so she believes Billy will want to tell her war stories after they have sex. She believes Billy will want to tell his stories to create his reality, but, more importantly, she believes the wrong stories about the war, believes what she has read or seen about what war is like, not knowing there is no way Billy could communicate the horrors he has seen. Vonnegut makes this connection clear in his description of the sex act, itself: "Billy made a noise like a small, rusty hinge. He had just emptied his seminal vesicles into Valencia, had contributed his share of the Green Beret" (151). This sexual act directly leads to Robert, who will become a Green Beret and fight in Vietnam. Sex between Valencia and Billy, then, literally leads to the continuation of war in the same way that, metaphorically, Valencia encourages Billy to tell her stories after sex, equating sex and war, making war seem something young men should want to involve themselves in. Robert comes from the combination of war and sex, both literally and figuratively.

Most of the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are unable to make the distinction between *foma* and those untruths that will do damage. It might be easy to dismiss the stories the characters tell themselves as nothing more than words. Kunze argues for the primacy of actions when he comments, "Rather, as the first and last chapters of the novel clearly reveal, [Vonnegut] seems to favor action over words, fundamentally aware that words are inadequate. Vonnegut is aware of the limitations of language; he does not dare to represent the firebombing itself" (53). However, Vonnegut also knows that words lead to actions, so the stories the characters tell

themselves are important. In the same way that Billy creates Tralfamadore as a mechanism to escape the war and his memories of it that lead to his quietism, numerous other characters tell themselves stories that justify their behavior to others. Stories matter because they shape how we view what is helpful or harmful in ourselves and others. As with Billy's delusions, Vonnegut wants readers, though, to see that there are both *foma* and harmful untruths and that one must navigate between them. Vonnegut presents a range of characters who are unable to make this distinction to reflect this dilemma in humanity. By showing characters who cannot make this distinction, he wants readers to understand the importance of such wisdom and adjust their lives accordingly.