

**Катерина Пожидаєва, Надія Пожидаєва**

ДВНЗ «Донбаський державний педагогічний університет»

Горлівський інститут іноземних мов

Україна

## **ATTITUDES TOWARDS SUFFERINGS SEEN BY VONNEGUT AND HIS CHARACTERS IN SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE**

In the 1960s, twenty years after World War II, the attitudes towards Germany and specifically towards the Dresden bombing were rather one-sided. It was a generally accepted notion, at least in the United States, that what happened in Dresden was justified. The bombings were necessary in order to stop the enemy, Nazi Germany - was the official stance. The morality of murdering an entire city of civilians who had nothing to do either with combat or war supplies was hardly questioned. After all, fascists have done much more harm and to imply that perhaps Americans, as “the good guys”, may have done the same thing to a German city was unthinkable. However, that was exactly what Vonnegut suggested. He dared to look back at this horrific event with pity for people who died there. Neither vengeance, nor spite, nor any other emotion but human pity and sympathy. Despite the overwhelming opinion which was present at the time of seeing all Germans as bad and almost non-human, Vonnegut raised the issue of dehumanizing German victims decades before first historical essays with the same opinion were published [3, p. 5].

We can argue that maybe this is why it took Vonnegut more than twenty years to write about Dresden; he was torn, feeling conflicting

emotions On the one hand, the supposed hatred to all Germans and Nazis, complete lack of sympathy to any and all of them, and on the other, basic human understanding that there are no “us” and “them” but instead it is simply “people”. For instance, in *Slaughterhouse*, time and time again he proves to the readers that there is not that big a difference between English and German soldiers, prisoners and people in general. They are good or bad, brave or cowardly, generous or greedy, but when it comes to it, their nationality does not matter; it does not define them.

This is what made the novel so radical at the time. Even the implication of the idea that the winners are somehow similar to the losers was taboo. Not too many people were brave enough to challenge the stigma behind the tragedy. After all, it was the Nazis who perished during the bombing so no one should care about them. However, Vonnegut challenged that idea and told the story from his perspective – about good and bad people from both sides and about thousands of civilians whose bodies he was taking from the shelters after bombings. To equalise the deaths of millions of Nazi victims to hundreds of thousands of German civilians, to make it the same and no less was to challenge the status quo of the accepted belief that “Every German is responsible for the sin of the Nazis”.

*Slaughterhouse's* success mostly can be explained by the timing of the publication. In 1969 the US had an ongoing war in Vietnam, so writing about World War II was relatable to people who were going through another war themselves. Besides that, the novel was presented in such a way that offered a new perspective on the issue. By abandoning all the traditional notions of the war novel, not only the contents of the novel were interesting, but also the way it was written. Time-traveling, non-chronological writing added to the appeal of the non-traditional novel, something that people at the time desperately needed.

What helped with deconstructing the binary of good war/bad war and winner/loser is the Vietnam war. At the time of publishing, the Vietnam war was compared to the World War II. There was a new generation of Americans who grew up with the glory of it, the decisive, clear victory against the Nazis. With the Vietnam war, the lines of good and bad and winning and losing are more blurred than with the Second World War. People who grew up with very strict and clear ideas of how the war was “supposed” to be were extremely confused as to how to feel about the Vietnam war, because by 1969, it was clear that it was not as simple and

that Americans were losing. The enemy itself was not as blatantly evil as the Nazis, the victory was not as obvious as the one in Berlin.

However, Vonnegut had defied those clear and defined standards in *Slaughterhouse*. With his writing, he did prove that war is never as clear as it seems. The enemy is not one-sided, the good guys do not always do good things and the victory is not all that satisfying. Especially with the Dresden bombing; technically, it was a military victory, but in reality, it was a moral defeat. What was important to the people who bombed it were numbers that have measured the lives lost and the damage done to the city. What did happen was that thousands of innocent people had died and this damage was useless from the strategic point of view. This is the tragedy of the bombing and what, perhaps, was something that Vonnegut and Billy were traumatized by, was the fact that none of that made any sense and was done for nothing.

But this is exactly the kind of thing that was not talked about before regarding war and something that Vonnegut brought up in his writing and what was interesting to the contemporary reader who was living through a Vietnam War. Deconstructing the war that was supposed to be the “standard” for wars, was just as confusing and cruel (even from the “good guys” side) served as sort of a “wake-up call” to Americans who were still reliving the glory days from more than twenty years ago.

Although Vonnegut was already known for that style of writing, the topics he was writing about were not as appealing to the audience or rather were not as relatable to them as writing about war in a straightforward, unbiased way. Vonnegut had rejected the main formula of writing [2, p. 23] – “God instructs, heroes enact, and writers record.”

It is possible that Vonnegut simply could not write a coherent story because he wanted to reflect how this event had left him feeling: broken. As he mentions at the very beginning, you cannot make anything good out of a tragedy. Perhaps it was necessary to write about such an event in a different, unusual way, since it defied all the traditional black-and-white ideas of good and evil.

Something worth mentioning is the images of trauma. One of such images would be of biblical figure, Lot’s wife, mentioned in the first chapter:

And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes.

People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore.

I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.

This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt."

Here, Vonnegut expresses his search for "tales of great destruction" and he stumbles upon a passage from Gideon Bible in his motel room [4, p. 25]:

The sun was risen upon the Earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

It describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which, according to the Bible, were destroyed by God's wrath for their sins. While the essence of the destruction and its nature is still debated, it is most commonly accepted that the inhabitants of those cities were vicious and immoral, and so the world would be a better place without them. However, Lot and Lot's wife, mentioned in the quote, were amongst the ten virtuous people that could be saved from Sodom. While they were fleeing, they were told not to look back and yet, despite this warning, Lot's wife did and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Now, knowing this context, it is much easier to see why Vonnegut did choose this quote to describe his feelings towards the bombing of Dresden. Here, the comparison between Dresden and Sodom is implied, as well as the comparison between Lot's wife and Vonnegut himself.

Let us analyse the first comparison first. It can be said that both Dresden and Sodom were full of people who did not deserve to be saved, from this perspective at least. Sodom, full of sinners that perished because of God's anger, and Dresden, full of Nazi Germans, who have committed numerous crimes against humanity. For Vonnegut it was easier to draw this line as he was able to analyse and see the situation from inside. Maybe in his head he was trying to justify the destroying of Dresden as much as he could. Being a pacifist rather than militarist, all he could do was search for an explanation in the Bible, find references in the wisest book of the ages.

The second comparison would be the comparison between Vonnegut and Lot's wife. Vonnegut argues that this act of turning back is what makes her so human to him, something that, perhaps, makes her different from all the other people there. In this interpretation, she was not indifferent to people's sufferings and misfortunes, however awful those people were. And of course, the biggest similarity between them is how they both looked back on something so horrible. We cannot know in what sense Vonnegut meant that, and countless of theologians have argued as to why Lot's wife did so, but there are a couple of possibilities. Judging by other things said in the book, the author looked back on Dresden because he felt like he needed to tell others about it. He could not go on with this life until he would write this "book on Dresden", and even though it took him more than twenty years to do so, he had succeeded in the end, but at what cost?

According to this quote, he did turn into a pillar of salt, just like Lot's wife. If we were to try and analyse this, even figuratively, what did Vonnegut mean when he said that this book was written by a pillar of salt? Was he now an emotionless statue, incapable of feeling human emotions, or was it all simply a clever word play, done so in order for us to relate him to Lot's wife? Another thing that can be discussed is why exactly they turned to salt. Was it due to seeing all of the deaths and horrors or was the simple act of looking back responsible for that?

What we also can notice while reading this quote is how Vonnegut says that people are not supposed to look back and he "certainly is not going to anymore". Is this simply an observation that he had based on his life, or rather a precaution, a warning to others, who had gone through similar things as him? So, it can be treated as one of his coping mechanisms, stating that it is better to live your life without looking back on all the traumatic things.

As stated before, Vonnegut definitely sees himself as a person similar to the figure of Lot's wife. It is so because she also challenged the status quo of "Every person in Sodom is a sinner and deserves to die". As we know, she was punished by the all-seeing God for daring to challenge His authority. What Vonnegut also mentions is that this is the thing that makes her so human to him. By analysing this quote, we can come to the conclusion that this is also the way that he sees himself and perhaps, even urges other people to do so. One of the interpretations of Vonnegut's

statement about Lot's wife can be, simply put, that we need to be more compassionate to each other, even in grave danger. Even when we are to lose our life for doing something as simple as feeling compassion and empathy, we need to listen to those feelings because this is what makes us human.

We could argue that this is the most anti-war statement in the entire book. To say that no matter what happens on the political side of the story, we are still humans and still need to take care of each other is so powerful when looked at in context. That no matter which side we are on, it is more important that we stay humane and not hurt each other. Although this statement regarding the World War II became a sentimental cliché already in the 1960s, perhaps because it was said only about the victims of the Nazis, to flip the narrative and say the same thing about German civilians was quite revolutionary.

When discussing the images or representations of trauma in *Slaughterhouse*, there is one detail in particular worth analyzing – the teapot from Dresden, since it is mentioned in the very first lines of the first chapter. According to Vonnegut, this is indeed a true story, which makes the whole scene even more interesting. The image of this teapot is mentioned a couple more times throughout the novel, always appearing in the same context. We might even say that this trivial detail seems a little too insignificant to mention so many times. However, when we look at how trauma survivors usually remember the traumatic event, we have some interesting conclusions to make. As it is generally believed, trauma survivors in general do not remember the whole event clearly. Our brains cannot cope with such an amount of traumatic information, so they do their best to erase all the evidence. Therefore, the memory of such an event, if any, is really fuzzy, and only small details which can perhaps be seen as trivial or even ridiculous remain. Moreover, being aware of how this process works, we can speculate that maybe the teapot was such a memory for Vonnegut himself. Although throughout the entire novel we are taunted with this idea of finally hearing what actually happened in Dresden in 1945, we never actually get any dramatic re-enactment, full of gruesome details that make us recoil in horror. No, instead we are given a very much generalised description that leaves a lot to the imagination.

But coming back to the teapot, not only is it the symbol of the memory of the Dresden massacre, but also again of the absurdity of war. If we

remember the context, an American soldier in the ruins of Dresden, picked up this teapot that was not his, and for this crime he was killed. In the first chapter of the book where the author speaks in the first person, he even says that he wanted to make this scene the climax of the novel due to its bitter irony. The whole absurdity of the situation is that after a literal massacre, after a whole city has been wiped off the face of the earth, there is a trial held for a soldier who stole a teapot, and then got shot afterwards for having committed the crime. This detail is allegedly based on the real thing – some French and American soldiers were indeed executed for taking food from wrecked shops [1, p.115].

Focusing on the teapot instead of focusing on the horrific context of the event also allows Vonnegut to recall the bombing without thinking about the massacre itself. Research done by scientists at University of Illinois shows that focusing on the context of a traumatic event can diminish the negative effects of remembering it. That means that, for instance, focusing on a minor detail, or a background detail (such as a teapot in this case) can help recall negative or painful memories without long-term damage.

So far, we have discussed the meaning of an image of teapot, but now I would like to speculate why exactly this is an image of a teapot and not, let's say, a chair. A teapot in on itself is quite a fragile thing that it is already quite miraculous that it had survived such an intense bombing. This only confirms the idea of absurdity of the situation, where countless old, sturdy buildings were destroyed, but a teapot remained. Furthermore, a teapot is something not only fragile, but usually associated with home and domesticity. If we look deeper into that, we can say that to Vonnegut, this teapot also meant that in spite of all these atrocities happening right before his eyes, something as simple as, again, intimacy and family are still present.

Another similar representation of trauma can be an image of bugs trapped in amber, specifically the three ladybugs in amber that Billy has in his office. Both of the times they are mentioned in regards with Tralfamadorians and the passage of time, however, they can also be analyzed as an image of trauma. The way they are mentioned in the book, it is said that the bugs are trapped in the moment, just like Billy, and they cannot get out of it. When we think about it, we can also understand it as a way both Billy and Vonnegut are affected by the Second World War.

If we look even closer at this image of bugs trapped in amber, we will see that the bugs are not actually inside anymore – after years and years of being inside of it, they decompose and the only thing left is an empty shape of an insect that was once there. It can be seen as something that helps Billy to cope with emptiness in his life. Perhaps we can even say that this is also representative of how the war left him feeling empty and how this war was something that happened to him due to twists of fate, just like the bugs get trapped in sap. To add to this, in the novel this whole scene as bugs trapped in amber, so again, we can possibly say that Billy also feels trapped in this memory of war, until it destroys him, only leaving his empty shape behind.

## Literature

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### **Summary**

The article examines the issue of duality and dwells upon the binary of good war/bad war and winner/loser. A new perspective on the issue of “every German is responsible for the sin of the Nazis”, first introduced by Kurt Vonnegut, has been given thorough consideration in the paper. Vonnegut defied standards in *Slaughterhouse-five*. With his writing, he proves that war is never as black and white as it seems. The enemy is not one-sided, the good guys do not always do good things and the victory is not all that satisfying. To say that no matter what happens on the political side of the story, we are still humans and still need to take care of each other was quite revolutionary considering Vonnegut’s attempt to flip the narrative and say the same thing about German civilians. It defied all the traditional black-and-white ideas of good and evil. Not too many people were brave enough to challenge the stigma behind the tragedy of Dresden massacre. Vonnegut challenged that idea and told the story from his perspective – about good and bad people from both sides and about thousands of civilians whose bodies he was taking from the shelters after bombings.

**Keywords:** a new perspective, the binary of winner/loser, a moral defeat, to flip the narrative, representations of trauma, massacre.

### **Резюме**

В статье рассматривается проблема двойственности и бинарной оппозиции хорошей войны/плохая война и победителя / проигравшего. В работе подробно рассматривается новый взгляд на проблему “каждый немец несет ответственность за грех нацистов”, впервые предложенный Куртом Воннегутом. Воннегут бросил вызов стандартам в «Бойне номер пять». Своим творчеством он доказывает, что война никогда не бывает такой черно-белой, как кажется. Враг не является односторонним, хорошие парни не всегда делают хорошие вещи, и победа не всегда приносит удовлетворение. Сказать, что независимо от того, что происходит на политической стороне истории, мы все еще люди и все еще должны заботиться друг о друге, было довольно революционно, учитывая попытку Воннегута перевернуть повествование и сказать то же самое о немецких гражданских лицах. Это было вызовом всем традиционным черно-белым представлениям о добре и зле. Не так уж много людей имеют достаточно храбрости, чтобы бросить вызов стандартам по отношению трагедии Дрезденских массовых убийств. Воннегут бросил вызов этой идее и рассказал историю со своей точки зрения – о хороших и плохих людях с обеих сторон и о тысячах мирных жителей, чьи тела он забирал из бомбоубежищ после бомбежек.

**Ключевые слова:** новая перспектива, бинарная оппозиция победитель/проигравший, переворот в повествовании, представление о травме, массовое убийство.

