

## **Mixing Fantasy with Fact: Kurt Vonnegut's Use of Structure in *Slaughterhouse-Five***

*Jennifer Moody*

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a pseudo-autobiographical novel about the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany during World War II. While the author did not, of course, visit an alien planet or travel through time, Vonnegut was a prisoner-of-war in Dresden at the time and observed the carnage firsthand. Twenty-five years after the incident, he finally penned down his "famous book about Dresden" (Vonnegut 24). Instead of writing a memoir, a political diatribe, or even a manifesto, Vonnegut chose to portray realistic events fictitiously—even fantastically—by inventing the character of Billy Pilgrim, who becomes "unstuck in time" throughout his life, is abducted by aliens, and witnesses the fire-storming of Dresden (Vonnegut 29).

In order to understand this book, one must understand Vonnegut's choice in the particular structure. Vonnegut's use of quick, succinct paragraphs that do not follow a direct timeline but instead jump forward and backward coincide with the Tralfamadorian belief that one can experience all moments at any given time because time itself is not linear. For Billy Pilgrim, this means that he never knows *when* he will be, for he can "[walk] through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941" (Vonnegut 29). For Vonnegut, it means he can never escape Dresden; although he states that he would not look back again at the war, the author also asserts that "[*Slaughterhouse-Five*] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt," which refers to the Biblical story of Lot's wife who looks back after Lot told her not to, and God consequently turns her into a pillar of salt (28).

For the readers, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war book that transcends World War II and applies to every generation. Since “there would always be wars [and] they were easy to stop as glaciers,” it is apparent that humanity has gotten itself into an inescapable cycle of death and destruction (Vonnegut 4). For that, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is still, and always will be, relevant, regardless of whether or not a war is occurring presently, because—as the Tralfamadorians say—it *always* occurs at some moment in time. Dresden is currently being bombed, as are Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and those people that died then are still dying now. In order to avoid war, one must never have started it, which is impossible considering that the world has seen it before. People have to ignore the finality of death and only focus on the good things, like the Tralfamadorians do.

While many critics disagree on the meaning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, T.J. Matheson notes, “most critics *are* agreed that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a carefully structured work” (228). Matheson continues to say that even though Vonnegut refers to his work as a “lousy little book,” Vonnegut would never “publish it in a form he found unsatisfactory” (Vonnegut 2; Matheson 230). That said, one can correctly assume that Vonnegut wrote his masterpiece in exactly the way he saw it fit, despite what his worst critics had to say. When Vonnegut speaks about contacting his old war buddy Bernard O’Hare to help him remember his experiences, Matheson points out that “it should come as no surprise...to learn that the novel as he originally conceived it was to have had a form, tone, and structure far different from that which *Slaughterhouse-Five* eventually assumed” (232). Although Vonnegut did not set out to write his novel the way he did, somewhere along the way, he chose to invent a fictional character, optometrist Billy

Pilgrim, whose outrageous time-traveling voyage better portrays the Dresden firebombing than any boring historical war novel could.

Matheson also asserts that writing a normal war novel “with a strict reliance on chronology...will present the reader with an illusion of logic and meaning by virtue of the apparent causal pattern therein,” and since there is no logic in war, Vonnegut disrupted the natural progress of things, putting his scenes wildly out of order and jumbling them up in order to demonstrate its irrationality and chaos (233). In a slightly different direction, critic Josh Simpson believes that, while *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, in its barest form, a book about the firebombing of Dresden, “on a deeper level it is also the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man so tormented and haunted by the burden of the past that he finds it necessary to ‘reinvent’ his own reality” (266). This directly correlates to the structure of the book that Matheson discusses, because Billy’s splitting psyche results from his trauma during the war. Unable to cope with such horror he spirals out of control, showing what war and bad ideas can do to humanity,” both physically and psychologically (Simpson 267).

Critic Wayne D. McGinnis argues that Billy Pilgrim’s occupation as an optometrist is not an accident on Vonnegut’s part, since “the lenses are corrective metaphorically as well as physically,” alluding to Billy’s time with the Tralfamadorians and his strive to deliver his message of non-linear time and Tralfamadorian philosophy to the Earthlings who do not see as clearly as he does (56). His profession also serves to “explain why Vonnegut chose a non-linear structure for his novel” since it is a job that relies on moving back and forth with different lenses to fit a patient properly and also

culminates in the patient seeing the world entirely different than before he is correctly fitted (McGinnis 56).

Michael E. Bailey, in his November 2006 article entitled “Life in a Feed Lot,” agrees with both McGinnis and Matheson, affirming that “the story, like his character, jumps forward and backwards over the course of Billy’s life,” successfully “[culminating] in Billy’s experience of the fire-bombings of Dresden by the Allies” (11). The simplest theme of the novel is indeed the historical event of Dresden, which can be considered the basic plot; nonetheless, one must search deeper into its depths to fully appreciate and understand Vonnegut’s emphatic anti-war stance. Bailey states *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not an adventure, despite Billy’s time-traveling antics, because adventure “implies the presence of a hero, a person whose thoughts and actions shape the course of the narrative” (11). Since the majority of the narrative is anti-war, it is impossible to have a war with a hero, because all of humanity is nothing but “listless playthings of enormous forces” (Bailey 11). Vonnegut portrays Billy as a weak, dislikable character on purpose in order to convey the lack of heroism in a war. With the novel’s structure as chaotic as the war itself, there is never a need for a hero in its pages, as there was never a need for a hero in Dresden, either.

Despite the critics’ different interpretations of Vonnegut’s Dresden novel, they all agree that the anti-linear structure applies to Billy Pilgrim’s time-traveling, Vonnegut’s struggle to cope with the Dresden firebombing and its aftermath, and the Tralfamadorian outlook on life—that is to say, the Tralfamadorians only pick and choose the happiest, prettiest moments to focus on, thereby avoiding death entirely, even though death is inescapable and will always be there.

Whether or not Billy Pilgrim honestly time-travels is mostly irrelevant, because Billy Pilgrim believes that he does. Whether or not he imagines it all, or truly mates with Montana Wildhack in a Tralfamadorian zoo, does not detract from the lessons he learned about life and death. In reference to the end of the universe, the Tralfamadorians admit that one of their own pilots accidentally destroys the universe when he presses a wrong button while testing a new fuel. When Billy questions why they do not prevent the pilot from pressing the button, they tell him that “he has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him” because “the moment is *structured* that way” (Vonnegut 149). In this way, they say, preventing war is stupid because there will always be war, since there always has been war, and it is better to simply “spend eternity looking at pleasant moments” instead of dwelling on the bad (Vonnegut 150).

In another moment, when Billy is an older man and on Earth, he inspects a young boy’s eyes and “[tells] him matter-of-factly about his adventures on Tralfamadore, [assuring] the fatherless boy that his father was very much alive still in moments the boy would see again and again” before finally asking, “Isn’t that comforting?” (Vonnegut 172). Although Billy’s daughter immediately takes him home and views him as insane, he clearly tries to use his Tralfamadorian life lessons in order to help others cope with pain and loss as he has. While there is evidence that Billy has simply gone insane, it is irrelevant, because Billy believes he has not lost his mind, and therefore, he has not.

When focusing on Vonnegut’s role in his novel, looking past the first chapter in which he sets up his storyline and his character, the reader sees only two instances of his involvement—on page 160, with the British soldiers, and page 189, in a boxcar in Dresden. On both occasions, the speaker turned out to be Vonnegut himself,

experiencing the same thing that Billy was at the time, which the author emphasized when he says, “That was I. That was me” (160, 189). With those two examples it is clear that this is not merely a book of fiction, though plenty of fiction exists in the text. All of Billy’s experiences in Dresden (minus the time-traveling and some of the people he had met) did indeed happen to Vonnegut, who has never been able to shake them, since he has been turned into a pillar of salt for looking back.

In the final chapter of the novel, Vonnegut interjects Billy’s narrative with the Tralfamadorian phrase of “so it goes” in order to illustrate his personal association with death, citing Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his own father (268). The audience sees Vonnegut borrowing some of Billy’s wisdom when discussing death, because death is unavoidable, and it is better to look at the happy moments. When one allows the good moments to suck one in, the bad ones tend to have less power over that person, which is the goal for anyone who has post-traumatic stress like Vonnegut. Also, the novel is obviously Vonnegut’s personal cleansing and his own way of coping—a way for him to acknowledge that it sucks and for him to do his damndest to move on.

While *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war book, the reader may have difficulty pinpointing the specific passages that make it so. Since Billy Pilgrim’s story is the focus, and many disregard Vonnegut’s first chapter of obvious distaste for the war, the author infers a lot of Billy’s painful war memories. For instance, when Billy and the other American prisoners work at the factory that creates vitamin- and mineral-rich syrup for pregnant women, Billy spoons and steals syrup shortly after he arrives, because “they needed vitamins and minerals, too” as underfed, malnourished prisoners-of-war (Vonnegut 204). Billy’s first taste of the syrup causes “every cell in [his] body [to shake]

him with ravenous gratitude and applause,” and when Billy gives some of this syrup to Edgar Derby, “a moment [passes], and then Derby [bursts] into tears” at the overwhelming sensation of it (Vonnegut 204, 205). As a theme dispersed inside *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses deceptively minute actions or gestures that evoke a much stronger emotion than is perhaps necessary. The straightforward, uncomplicated act of sipping syrup brings a tough, grown man to tears; subtly, the scene illustrates the quiet despair of the war, and how one simple action is seemingly blown out of proportion, creating a synonym for war itself: it takes one little nudge to get the giant snowball rolling down the mountain, effectively killing everything in its path. So it goes.

Billy Pilgrim may have been insane, and the harrowing effects of the Dresden firebombing may have taken a toll on his mentality, but the fact remains that Billy Pilgrim thinks he went to Tralfamadore and learns how to cope with life from the beings there. Vonnegut uses several Tralfamadorian beliefs to cope with Dresden’s lifelong lingering effects. And certainly, the novel presents itself in a Tralfamadorian fashion, skipping in time from one moment to the next, from unpleasantness to contentment, back and forth, in a circular path that deviates from linear time, always closing one door in 1962 to subsequently open another one in 1950.

While Vonnegut’s critics cannot seem to agree on what this novel represented, they do allow that the non-linear, non-traditional, non-anything fashion of the novel is critical to its inherent message of war being bad without anyone being able to do anything about it. Vonnegut could have easily written a standard war novel—this happened here, then they went there, then this happened there—yet he chose instead to specifically use elements of pure fantasy to construct a novel of a man who handles

disaster and uses Billy Pilgrim as a disconnected figure in order to create a cathartic experience for himself.

Whether or not he succeeds, however, is entirely up to the reader and his or her ability to connect the disjointed paragraphs with a discontinuous, but very real, timeline. Without understanding Vonnegut's particular structure, however, one cannot hope to understand the anti-war sentiments of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

### **Works Cited**

Bailey, Michael E. "Life in a Feed Lot." *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 19 (2006): 10-12.

Matheson, T.J. "'This Lousy Little Book: The Genesis And Development Of Slaughterhouse Five As Revealed In Chapter One.'" *Studies in the Novel* 16 (1984): 228-39.

McGinnis, Wayne D. "The Arbitrary Cycle of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: A Relation of Form to Theme." *Critique* 17 (1975): 55-67.

Simpson, Josh. "'This Promising of Great Secrets: Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Slaughterhouse-Five, and Breakfast of Champions Or 'Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World: Science Fiction...'" *Critique* 45 (2004): 261-71.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five: A Duty-Dance with Death*. New York: Dial P Trade Paperbacks, 1999.