

Structure and meaning in kurt vonnegut's slaughterhouse five

[Experience](#), [Laughter](#)



One of the most distinguishing aspects of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is the structure in which it is written. Throughout the novel, Billy Pilgrim travels uncontrollably to non-sequential moments of his life, or as Vonnegut says, "paying random visits to all events in between." (23). In order to exemplify this for the reader, Vonnegut uses a non-linear and seemingly sporadic storyline. However, by the end of the novel, Vonnegut's use of plot fragmentation is clear. By constantly jumping back and forth throughout time, Vonnegut keeps all of the novel's most significant events fresh in the reader's mind. With his immediate and thought provoking introduction, "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (23), Vonnegut establishes that there is something unique about Billy Pilgrim. By choosing the word "unstuck", he implies that Billy has just been freed of something. In doing so, Vonnegut also prepares the reader for the non-linear storyline that follows. In fact, the rest of the novel consists of nothing more than random moments of Billy Pilgrim's life. By portraying Billy in this way, the reader gets an all-encompassing perspective of Billy as a person, instead of having a myopic view that is based on a particular incident of Billy's life. This same technique also allows Vonnegut to keep significant parts of Billy's life fresh in the reader's mind throughout the novel. For example, Billy's experience during World War II and the bombing of Dresden are some of the most significant parts of his life. Vonnegut introduces them to the reader very early on in the novel simply by mentioning "Billy first came unstuck while World War II was in progress" (30). Again, Vonnegut's way of writing has allowed him to redefine what makes sense in *Slaughterhouse Five*, as opposed to a typical chronological novel. As a result, the reader will be aware of the ongoing war,

allowing them to build a mental picture that is constantly being developed with each event Billy encounters. Furthermore, Vonnegut's ability to give a first-hand account of an event before it happens chronologically in turn allows readers to be able to reflect on an event as it resurfaces later in the novel. Again, this theme most strongly relates to Billy's wartime experiences. Vonnegut returns time after time to the violence and destruction that surrounded Billy while he was a prisoner of war. And since these frightful and damaging thoughts rarely leave Billy's mind, Vonnegut makes it so that they do the same for the reader. While Billy's horrific experiences during the war play an active role in his personality and lifestyle, he is manipulated even further by his ability to become "unstuck in time". Because Billy is constantly jumping through time, he is never given the opportunity to become comfortable in a single moment of his life. As a result, Billy says that he is in "a constant state of stage fright" (Vonnegut 23). This explains Billy's lack of focus and initiative that is evident throughout the novel. He is forced to improvise his entire life, attempting to portray all of it at once, going fearfully from one moment to another, always without warning. Billy's life consists of pieces that have no obvious coherency with one and other. Vonnegut himself sums up the meaning of his approach in describing the Tralfamadorian's books through the words of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut writes: "There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous

moments seen all at one time.” (Vonnegut 88). In this statement, Vonnegut emphasizes once more the importance of viewing many moments as a whole picture. At first glance, the spontaneous events appear to be incompatible with each other, telling many stories, but signifying nothing. However, this is exactly what Vonnegut hoped to achieve; these separate stories force the reader to view them all as one, or not at all.