

# The catastrophe of war in slaughterhouse five

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



## The Catastrophe of War in Slaughterhouse-Five Russian Prime Minister

Joseph Stalin once said, " A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic." The impersonalization of war and death that he shares is an realistic characterization of war; originally intending to improve the lives of people, yet inevitably leading to the destruction of human life. Author Kurt Vonnegut endorses this view in his novel Slaughterhouse-Five; he shows that war can never be justified as long as innocent life is lost. Throughout Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut explores the theme of free will in order to illustrate the absurdity of war. Vonnegut conveys this through setting, characters, structure, and style. Vonnegut uses setting to convey the terrors of war by juxtaposing the hell-like Dresden with the heavenly Tralfamador. After the firebombing of Dresden, when the soldiers emerge out of a slaughterhouse, they find the entire city desolate and destroyed. As the soldiers wander out of the slaughterhouse, Vonnegut writes, " One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved represented a flaw in the design. There were to be no moon men at all. 135, 000 civilians are killed in the raid, almost twice the number who would later die at Hiroshima" (Vonnegut 180). While in Dresden, the soldiers were surrounded by death, and even rode in a " coffin-shaped green wagon" (Vonnegut 194) through the ruins. The Dresden firebombing also exemplifies the absurdity of war because Dresden was an open city with no military significance, yet the Allies decided to bomb it anyways. In contrast with Dresden, while held captive on the far-off planet of Tralfamador, Billy Pilgrim lives an ideal life, in which he is sleeping with a beautiful movie star. Also, the Tralfamadorian

view on free will releases Billy from any guilt he felt about the war. When describing wars, one Tralfamadorian claims, " There isn't anything we can do about them, so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments-like today at the zoo" (Vonnegut 117). While on Tralfamador, Billy lives in a dream world in which he only looks at pleasant moments and forgets about all of the horrible events of his life. Vonnegut uses the blissful Tralfamador in order to contrast and accentuate the horrors of Dresden. Also, the protagonist of Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy Pilgrim, uses distancing behavior and in order to cope with the horrors of war. Throughout the course of the novel, Billy Pilgrim continues to alienate himself from his peers. His time travels prevent him from forming any strong continuous relationships with others (" Slaughterhouse" 264). One example of Billy's alienating behavior occurs when a black man taps on Billy's window to talk to him. After clearly seeing the man, " Billy Pilgrim did the simplest thing. He drove on" (Vonnegut 59). Billy's dislocation " serves as a metaphor for the sense of alienation and dislocation which follows the experience of catastrophic violence" (" Slaughterhouse" 264). Billy's condition is, " on one level, a symbol of the shock, confusion, dislocation, and desire for escape that result from the horrible experiences of war" (Cox 270). Billy is also distant and alienated because of his views on free will. Because Billy learns that he does not have free will and that all moments are preordained, he releases himself from any guilt he feels about the war. For example, " Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do" (Vonnegut 60). Billy's indifference towards the war prevents him from being held

accountable for events such as the Dresden firebombing. Billy Pilgrim's response to the horrors of war is not to attempt to create change but to become isolated and indifferent in order to avoid dealing with his past. The Tralfamadorians also suggest the ridiculous belief that war is inevitable. During Billy's stay on Tralfamador, the Tralfamadorians inform him that there is no such thing as free will, as all moments are preordained. They claim, "Only on earth is there any talk of free will"(Vonnegut 86). Billy then decides that war is inevitable, so there is nothing he can do to change or prevent it. After writing the serenity prayer, the narrator explains, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (Vonnegut 60). Billy Pilgrim uses the Tralfamadorian point of view in order to relieve himself of the guilt he felt about the war. Vonnegut explains the Tralfamadorian point of view in order to sarcastically assess free will. By using something supernatural to claim that man is powerless, Vonnegut is directing his frustration towards those who rationalize horrible events such as war as being unavoidable. One critic claims, "Vonnegut's message to America is this: America has adopted the Tralfamadorian philosophy, which justifies apathy...we feel powerless, helpless, and impotent...What Vonnegut would have us do is develop the wisdom to discriminate between what we can or cannot change, while developing the courage to change what we can. We have met Billy Pilgrim and he is us" (Harris 277). Ultimately, Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorians to urge humans to rid themselves of the ridiculous belief that war is inevitable. The non-chronological structure of Slaughterhouse-Five also plays a significant role in conveying the jumbled, disorganized nature of war. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut continuously

jumps back and forth to different points in Billy Pilgrim's life. Billy is constantly traveling through time to different events during his life, without any clue as to where he will end up next. This parallels the chaotic and disorderly nature of war. When describing the structure of the story, Vonnegut writes, " It is so jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again" (Vonnegut 19). Although the structure of the novel may seem wandering and random, it is actually intricately designed in order to parallel the wandering and random nature of war (Reed 178). Vonnegut also creates the non-chronological structure in an attempt to give structure to the chaos that was the Dresden story. While narrating the story, Vonnegut writes, " I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper. I used my daughters crayons, a different color for each main character...The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side" (Vonnegut 5). Through creating this outline, Vonnegut is attempting to give form to the war, in which " time, space and event coexist and coalesce" (Reed 178). The novel is structured in a jumbled and non-chronological way because in a war, time is jumbled and chaotic as well. The structure of the novel is also unique in that it is narrated by Vonnegut. This narration reflects Vonnegut's efforts to come to terms with his own war experiences. Vonnegut writes about himself through Billy Pilgrim as Vonnegut was also captured by the Germans during World War II, and witnessed the firebombing of the "

open city" of Dresden (Cox 270). The first chapter consists of Vonnegut explaining the difficulties he had in writing the book (Cox 270). In the first chapter, Vonnegut writes, " It is so jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (Vonnegut 19). Vonnegut is so overwhelmed by the horrors of war that he doubts his ability to write about them (" Slaughterhouse" 265). Later in the book, even Vonnegut himself becomes a character. When describing Dresden, Vonnegut shifts to first person plural when he writes, " Now Billy and the rest were being marched into the ruins by their guards. I was there. O'Hare was there. Wee had spent the past two nights in the blind innkeeper's stable. Authorities had found us there" (Vonnegut 181). This shift in tense suggests that the story is not merely Billy Pilgrim's, but Vonnegut's as well (Harris 274). As one critic explains, " Billy thus becomes a dual persona, a mask not only for Vonnegut-as-character, but for Vonnegut the author as well. Vonnegut has removed himself at least twice from the painful Dresden experience" (Harris 274). By narrating the story, Vonnegut addresses and comes to terms with his own horrific war experiences. In describing the horrors of war, Vonnegut also uses a straightforward style as well as black humor in order to convey the absurdity of war. In describing the overwhelming events of war, Vonnegut uses the same language one might use to explain something to a child (" Slaughterhouse" 266). For example, when describing Billy Pilgrim's march into a German prison camp, he writes, " A motion-picture camera was set up at the border-to record the fabulous victory...One of them singled out Billy's face for a moment, then focused at infinity again. There was a tiny plume of smoke at infinity. There was a battle there. People were dying there. So it

goes" (Vonnegut 65). By using this straightforward style, " Vonnegut forces the reader to confront the fundamental horror and absurdity of war head-on, with no embellishments, as if his readers were seeing it clearly for the first time" (" Slaughterhouse 267). Vonnegut also uses black humor, which refers to " an author's deliberate use of humor in describing what would ordinarily be considered a situation too violent, grim, or tragic to laugh at. In so doing, the author is able to convey not merely the tragedy, but also the absurdity, of an event" (" Slaughterhouse" 267). One example of black humor is Vonnegut's description of Billy Pilgrim, in which he writes, " He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo" (Vonnegut 33). By referring to Billy Pilgrim as a " filthy flamingo", Vonnegut uses humor in order to convey both the tragedy of Billy's situation as well as the ridiculousness of the event. Through the use of a straightforward style and black humor, Vonnegut emphasizes the absurd and incomprehensible nature of war. Ultimately, Vonnegut uses a perceived view of free will in order to convey the absurdity of war. First, Vonnegut uses the idealistic Tralfamador in order to emphasize the horrors of Dresden. Secondly, Billy Pilgrim uses isolationist behavior in order to cope with his horrific war experiences. Vonnegut also uses the Tralfamadorian perception of free will to convince readers to rid themselves of the idea that war is inevitable. Structurally, he uses a non-chronological organization in order to parallel the disorderly nature of war. Also, Vonnegut narrates the story in order to come to terms with his own war history. Finally, he utilizes a straightforward style and black humor in order to express the irrationality of war. Vonnegut's beliefs are fairly easy to pull from his works; what is unique about him is that he took social protest to

new heights. His work had a definite and lasting impact on the world's perception of war, and forced readers to question the justification behind the actions of themselves and their nations. Works Cited Page Cox, F. Brett. " Criticism: Essay." Novels for Students. Ed. Diane Telgen and Kevin Hile. Vol 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 270-272. Harris, Charles B. " Criticism: Essay." Novels for Students. Ed. Diane Telgen and Kevin Hile. Vol 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 272-274. Reed, Peter J. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. New York: Warner, 1972. " Slaughterhouse-Five." Novels for Students. Ed. Diane Telgen and Kevin Hile. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 258-277. Vonnegut, Kurt. Slaughterhouse-Five. New York: Dell, 1969.