

# Portrayal of the damage caused by war through the protagonist in kurt vonnegut's ...

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



In Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author uses the protagonist Billy Pilgrim's experiences to portray the damage caused by war. Billy Pilgrim, a veteran of WWII, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological disorders from his experiences in the war. Due to these mental illnesses, Billy believes he can travel through time and space, ultimately seeing time differently. Through his time travel, he attempts to understand and express the atrocities he experienced in the war. He simply cannot understand the world in which he lives after the war. Through this struggle of Billy, Vonnegut argues that war contains no meaning and causes more harm than good. He uses the phrase "so it goes", the Tralfamadorian view on time, and the structure of the novel to raise important questions about war and to open people's eyes to the harm it causes. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut uses the phrase "So it goes" to connect together all the deaths that occur. This repetition creates a sense of satire throughout the novel. "So it goes" functions to make death seem meaningless, that all death simply does not matter and contains no meaning. Billy adopts this belief so much so that he does not care about his own death nor the death of his friends. "Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'so it goes'". Through Billy's apathy towards death, Vonnegut argues that death does have meaning and that people should care when people die. The satire here represents the view people have on war and how Vonnegut wants that to change. He argues that due to the death and destruction war causes it should carry a heavy weight when leaders make decisions.

This Tralfamadorians believe in a nonlinear timeline which contains many implication towards Vonnegut's argument. When Billy asks questions about the view of time to the Tralfamadorians, they describes it as " seeing time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains". This theory of time means one can see so much of it at once. They can move to see the beginning and the end. To further this image, he also uses this analogy; " Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber". This image refers to bugs who have been crystallized in amber for hundreds of years. The Tralfamadorians argue that in earthling view of time, humans get stuck too much in the single moments and don't understand that " All moment, past, present, and future always have existed, always will exist". These differing viewpoints change the way people live their lives. Humans, more so than the Tralfamadorian, value the moment. The Tralfamadorians however can see all of time past, present, and future. They can see what happens in the future, yet choose to do not change anything. This apathy serves to build on the satirical nature of the novel. Vonnegut argues here that carelessness of war means pitfalls and damages. The Tralfamadorians know how the universe gets destroyed, they cause it through an accident occurring during a rocket fuel test. They have knowledge about how the accident will occur yet change nothing. People know that going to war has the probability of killing many people yet still engage in it. Vonnegut purposely creates this similarity to illustrate the problem that keeps occurring. Vonnegut uses the structure of the novel to illustrate the struggles caused to people as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder. When Billy time travels, he " has no control over where he is going

next, and the trips aren't always necessarily fun." The sparsity of his time travel relates directly to veterans having memories and dreams of war. Vonnegut emphasizes these similarities even more so by having half of the novel consists of memories of real time war. This back and forth mirrors someone inability to remove a certain memory from of their head. He also discusses the difficult nature of coping with PTSD. Billy pilgrim uses the idea of time travel to attempt to cope, process, and understand the experiences he encountered in war. He relives certain events in this other planet several times displaying the struggles he encountered. Vonnegut also displays Billy's inability to process the events of war in his own life through Billy's interaction with his daughter. She calls to him and he does not respond, "Father? Daddy, Where are you? And so on. Billy didn't answer her, so she was nearly hysterical...".

Not only does this search for her father happening in real life but occurs metaphorically as well. Billy cannot help his daughter understand his struggles because he cannot even process it himself. All these scenes further Vonnegut's point that veterans suffering from PTSD struggle themselves and so do their family. He also uses this to argue about the negative aspects of war. He ultimately means the benefits of war do not outweigh the negative aspects of it. Vonnegut also uses the structure of the novel to argue about the meaninglessness of war. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut seems to haphazardly switch between Billy's time travel and the war. Through the different shifts, little logic seems involved in their organization. This represents the illogical nature of war. It does not make sense to participate

in war when it causes all this hurt to its victims. Vonnegut seems to give insight into this structure when the Tralfamadorians tell Billy about how they write their books; “ there isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep”. He uses this crazy, mixed up story to show his audience the complexities of war. These two different ways he uses the structure of the novel to argue against war are directly relates to his experiences in war. Vonnegut himself suffered through WWII as a veteran. He expresses his struggles and hardships with coping through the charter of Billy. Vonnegut agrees through this that hope can be seen and something “ beautiful, surprising and deep” through all of this depressing aspects of war. Billy has a quote in his office that offers more insight into the whole argument of the novel; “ God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference”. Billy’s inability to do these things builds an ironic aspect to the story. He cannot change his past and must come to terms with that.

In order to move on, he needs to understand this. Billy serves as testament that when one cannot understand this concept, he will have a difficult and painful life. Vonnegut argues that there certain aspects of people’s lives cannot change and that the key to living in peace and happiness people must be able to understand those things. All in all Vonnegut uses Billy as an example of how now to deal with stress and trauma in one’s past. Vonnegut has experiences similar to Billy’s so this novel serves as a way for him to

process these events at all. In a similar fashion as Billy using his fake reality, Vonnegut uses this fictional novel to process his all too real life. This personal insight builds to the meaning of the novel. People process their past in different ways. Some people cannot succeed, like Billy. The final section of the novel show Billy at the end of the war. He had been burning and burying bodies. The novel end with a bird saying " Poo-tee-weet?". This phrase repeats several times throughout the novel. It continues to signify the illogical nature of war. Nothing else can be said except for some nonsensical phrase by a bird. This has more significant because the newly freed prisoners do not celebrate. They simply stand there, unable to process that the war has finished. Vonnegut includes a question mark as if one could understand the question. This questions functions to show that war has no simple answers. This represents Vonnegut's beliefs about war. There is nothing logical about it, it hurts all involved, and needs to end, but how? Vonnegut does discuss the inevitability of wars; " What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers". Vonnegut does not know the answer because there may not be one. This novel expresses the dangers so that changes may happen eventually in the future.

The novel Slaughterhouse Five raises important questions about the necessity of war based on the harm it causes to the people involved. Vonnegut, thought the story of Billy Pilgrim, show the struggles of living through post- war life as a person who has been a part of it. Billy creates an alternate reality in his head which represents this struggle. Vonnegut also

builds his argument through the structure he employs throughout the novel. He uses a confusing seemingly random arrangement to represent the meaninglessness of war. Finally, he uses a nonsensical question of a bird to show that he cannot think of an answer to this complex issue. Through this book, Vonnegut hopes to show the way not to struggle through a traumatic past. He uses Billy's story to display this.