

# Insanity of war in slaughterhouse five

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



Slaughterhouse-Five, by Kurt Vonnegut Jr., is the tale of a gawky World War II veteran/soldier, Billy Pilgrim. His wartime experiences and their effects lead him to the ultimate conclusion that war is unexplainable. To portray this effectively, Vonnegut presents the story in two dimensions: historical and science-fiction. The irrationality of war is emphasized in each dimension by contrasts in its comic and tragic elements. The historical seriousness of the Battle of the Bulge and the bombing of Dresden are contrasted by many ironies and dark humor; the fantastical, science-fiction-type place of Tralfamadore is, in truth, an outlet for Vonnegut to show his incredibly serious fatalistic views. The surprising variations of the seriousness and light-heartedness allow Vonnegut to show effectively that war is absurd. The most important historical plot strand of Slaughterhouse-Five is Billy Pilgrim's war experience which occurs during the last six months of World War II. This plot strand follows Billy through the Battle of the Bulge and his presence as a POW during the bombing of Dresden, Germany. Vonnegut contrasts these documented milestones with incredible amounts of dramatic irony and dark humor. This provides the plot with not only comic relief, but examples of absurdities which parallel the message of the insanity of war. Billy, standing at a lanky six-foot two, is introduced in the middle of a Luxembourg forest during the Battle of the Bulge. He, along with two infantry scouts and an antitank gunner named Roland Weary, have been separated from their platoon and are alone in enemy territory. In contrast to the two scouts, who are quiet and swiftly moving through the forest, Weary and Billy are loud and clumsy. The scouts abandon Billy and Weary, as they are a threat to their survival. Ironically the talented, trained scouts are killed by the Germans,

whereas Billy and Roland are spared and merely taken as POWs. The simplicity and innocence in the description of the tragic ends of the scouts are told in the simple sentence, “ Three inoffensive bangs came from far away.” The ending of lives, especially that of comrades, cannot be characterized as “ inoffensive.” Billy doesn’t say this to be unsympathetic, but rather from the shock of a war that alters his perception of life, and makes him unable to deal with reality in a normal way. More irony is shown with the horrible conditions on the POW train headed for Dresden, plagued by cold weather, endless hours of nothing to do, and cramped surroundings. A hobo dies on one boxcar while proclaiming, “ You think this is bad? This ain’t so bad.” Also, Roland Weary dies of gangrene, as a result of going shoeless when he is stripped of his boots by German soldiers. He blames Billy for his death. Ironically, of the four original soldiers, Billy is the only one who remains alive, yet he is the most unlikely one to do so. Eventually, Billy makes it to Dresden, and he and the other American POWs are housed in Schlachthof-Funf (Slaughterhouse-Five), from which the book’s name is derived. Because Dresden is an “ open city”, not militarily important to the Allied Powers, people from surrounding cities flee to Dresden to take refuge. Ironically, the city is bombed and the thousands of people taking sanctuary in Dresden are all killed. Billy, the other American POWs, and their German guards are all saved from the bombing because they are in the highly sheltered basement of Slaughterhouse-Five. It is also ironic that the description of the bombing of Dresden, the most important event of the novel, is given one of the vaguest descriptions of the novel: “ There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive

bombs. The giants walked and walked.” After the bombings stop, the people taking shelter in Slaughterhouse-Five come out and look around at the once built-up, now leveled, industrial city. The POWs are now forced to help dig up the corpses of the victims of the Dresden bombings, a hard and repulsive job. At first, it is bearable, but after a few days the bodies start to decompose, and the smell becomes intolerable. One soldier dies from the dry heaves after being forced to work in a rotting corpse mine. Ironically, this man has survived the bombing of Dresden, yet dies from the smell of others who died in the bombing. Eventually, the corpse mines are closed because of the horrendous conditions, and the war ends. The book ends as Billy is walking out of the slaughterhouse after gaining his freedom and he notices is that, “ Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, “ Poo-tee-weet?”” The bird’s cameo in the story reinforces the idea that there is nothing to say about an unnecessary massacre as in Dresden, and that war is illogical, like the bird’s words. This is ironic, since the theme of the novel, which should be the clearest message derived from the story, is summed up in the incoherent words of a bird. All these incidences of irony show senselessness and coincidence, with undertones of dark humor. [In questioning why the incidences of the novel occur, it is impossible to give a logical explanation.] This parallels the idea that war is nonsense, senseless, full of coincidence, and is unexplainable. As a result of the trauma of Billy’s war experience, he faces an inability to deal with reality later in his life. The fantastical Tralfamadore is a planet where Billy escapes to when he feels life’s stresses; however mad Billy seems to have become, Tralfamadore doubles to reveal Vonnegut’s earnest fatalistic views. Tralfamadore is the epitome of all that is

right in the universe and points out all that is wrong on Earth. Its inhabitants, the Tralfamadorians, directly tell the “ lessons” that Vonnegut wants to emphasize to Billy and to the novel’s readers. The first things the Tralfamadorians tell Billy is how Earth is unlike any other planet in its superficial limits of time and its human beings’ belief in free will. A Tralfamadorian tells Billy:” All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all... bugs in amber... If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings... I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘ free will.’ I’ve [studied one hundred and thirty-one] inhabited planets in the universe... Only on Earth is there any talk of free will.” Here Vonnegut shows that he doesn’t believe in free will. He describes time and life as unexplainable, as the war is unexplainable. The Tralfamadorians tell Billy that, although Earth is corrupt, there is nothing he can do about it: “ Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does.” Just as Billy was destined to go to war, decided on by a “ higher being” (the government), the government was forced to go to war by a “ higher being” than they (God), and the war was predestined. This idea of fatalism attempts to justify the irrationality of war. Vonnegut, (and the Tralfamadorians) has come to the conclusion that the war can only be explained by saying that it was determined by a higher power. The fact that “ Earthlings” believe in free will, the opposite of fatalism, signifies that Earth is corrupt. However, looking past this, Billy knows that human beings have the capacity to be good, as he believes that he is a virtuous person. Because of this, Billy is given a human mate, Montana Wildhack, a beautiful movie star (from Earth) of the day. This

creates an Adam and Eve effect, holding Billy as the ultimate moral and kind being, and Montana as the ultimate physical being. Billy and Montana are supposed to populate Tralfamadore with Earthlings, to start the human race over on a clean slate, and in an environment away from the war and unexplainable evils on Earth. Tralfamadore, the insane figment of Billy's imagination, ironically shows and teaches Billy the most rational lessons that he observes throughout the whole book. In contrast to the ridiculous idea of a made-up planet, Tralfamadore symbolized fatalism and the Garden of Eden. Vonnegut gives a compelling account of the horrors of war using intricate, clever story-telling techniques, bringing together the extremes between truth (historical facts) and science fiction (futuristic imagination). He uses the extraordinary technique of combining the dark humor of Billy's views of World War II with the serious message from the figment of madness of Tralfamadore to show the inexplicable occurrences of war and its repercussions. This ingenious combination leads to a unique tale that is timeless and interesting, that brings the story of Dresden, of Tralfamadore, and of Billy Pilgrim, into the public eye.