

A strange case of self-assertion in vonnegut's novel



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Assuming you got a message anonymously, informing you that you were going to die because of a car accident tomorrow at noon, would you use this message to try avoiding death or would you simply accept and embrace your destiny? Many people, presumably, would be willing to make an effort to keep death away. But Billy Pilgrim's reaction is acceptance. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, written by Kurt Vonnegut, presents protagonist Billy Pilgrim as accepting nearly all the events that happened in his life, including his own death. Billy is indifferent and apathetic to his surroundings. He appears to be a fatalist, which sends readers the superficial message that Vonnegut is advocating passive acceptance. In contrast, the actual message is hidden a little more deeply. Instead of actually persuading the reader to truly believe in the idea of fatalism and giving up free will, Vonnegut hoped to incite the reader to resist fatalism and consider profoundly what free will means.

Vonnegut uses the sentence "it is structured that way" to explain why events have happened. When Billy is trapped by Tralfamadorian aliens for the first time, he asks for a reason why he is chosen. Instead of giving an explicit answer, Tralfamadorians respond to him with three questions: "Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything?" (97). Three consecutive "whys" evoke a deeper thought: whether people make decisions just because they are doomed to. Tralfamadorians believe that "this moment simply is" (97), indicating that moments always occur without any reason. However, the inability to think of a reason, or the lack of awareness of one, doesn't mean that the reason does not exist. Humans are manipulated neither by God nor by Fate. It is they who have the power to choose the path to walk on. Paths are created by choices, while choices originate from reasons. The

Tralfamadorians met Billy not because time is structured, or that they are fated to encounter him; they met him because Tralfamadorians made a decision to study Earthlings and they chose to come to the Earth.

Tralfamadorians, serve as characters advocating fatalism, also made an implicit decision which indicates Vonnegut actually encourages the reader to stand on the side of free will.

Billy Pilgrim, in an ironic twist on free will, learned to accept and embrace his fate after he met Tralfamadorians. They once told Billy that the universe was destroyed by one of their pilots when “ experimenting with new fuels” (149). Facing his question that why not prevent it, Tralfamadorians explained to him that the pilot “ has always pressed it, and he always will” (149) and that they “ always let him and they always will let him” (149). Tralfamadorians convince Billy that these and indeed any occurrences cannot be altered by any creature. Even though they know how the universe is going to be destroyed, they are not willing to make changes due to their belief in fatalism. Conversely, what if the universe is eventually destroyed just because they take no action to rescue it? It is their belief in fatalism that causes the end of the universe, yet they use the excuse “ the time is structured” and fatalism to explain and cover up their fault.

Billy stayed on Tralfamadore for several days, and when away from it he yearned for the “ peaceful life” on the planet. What he didn’t know is that they “ have wars as horrible as any he’s ever seen or read about on other days” (150). They live tranquilly by “ ignoring bad moments” and “ spending eternity looking at pleasant moments” since they firmly believe that “ there isn’t anything they can do about them” (150). Tralfamadorians deemed it <https://assignbuster.com/a-strange-case-of-self-assertion-in-vonneguts-novel/>

true that occurrence could not be altered, so they used the method of avoiding instead of making an effort to change or make up for bad moments. Indeed, avoiding bad moments could bring much happiness. But all moments are fixed moments. Even though there may be no chance to start over and stop it from happening, it is useless to avoid and simply give up the chance of remedy. Tralfamadorians would not like to make up for those horrible moments or wars because of fatalism. In fact, “fatalism” is their methods of avoiding confronting bad moments and terrible experiences.

Even though the book is full of moments spreading fatalism superficially, there’s no lack of scenes supporting free will, but Vonnegut depicts them in a subtle way. When the commander comes to persuade American soldiers to fight Russians with him, almost no one stands up to speak against him. Vonnegut explains “one of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (208). He suggests that soldiers have been tortured by war so long that their only reaction to a new war is acceptance. They have already given up their free will. However, when Edgar Derby chooses to speak up and resist new war, Vonnegut describes him, saying he “was a character now” (208). He addresses the idea that free will offers the ability to possess one’s own characteristics and to be a true character. Billy holds a belief in fatalism, but he is not a fanatic of it. There are also several moments Vonnegut depicts showing free will inside Billy’s heart. Vonnegut implies to the reader that Billy doesn’t like to talk about Tralfamadorians and always keeps it as a secret in his heart. Even when people ask him about it, he denies that he has secrets inside him. However, “Billy went to New York City, and got on an all-night radio program devoted to

talk. He told about having come unstuck in time. He said, too, that he had been kidnapped by a flying saucer in 1967" (32). After being through all these experiences, Billy becomes active and makes a decision by himself: speak about Tralfamadorians in front of the public. He doesn't hide secrets and he isn't passive any more. He chooses to be himself instead of being a victim of fate.

At the moment Billy decides to unveil his secret and speak about time-travel in public, he is on the side of free will, and so is Vonnegut. Vonnegut always leaves a small space for rumination and refutation when depicting every moment that advocated fatalism. He hopes readers will consider more deeply instead of just looking at the surface. By expressing the message of free will indirectly, he helps us to understand and comprehend those who believe in fatalism, and then build up our own idea. Hence, Vonnegut is making a strong case for the significance of free will.