

## Literary Techniques in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

By Corina P.

Kurt Vonnegut has gotten endless praise for some number of his works; *Slaughterhouse-Five* is certainly one of his most celebrated novels. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut writes more intimately than many novelists because he writes from his knowledge [written at E. Alamance H.S. in '07] about the human mind. Vonnegut's literary style in this novel has elements of both autobiography and an erratic time frame, based on the way humans perceive memories and time.

Although Billy Pilgrim is Vonnegut's protagonist, many events in the novel are based on his own experiences. *Slaughterhouse-Five* "...is as much about Vonnegut's effort to tell his story as it is about Billy Pilgrim" (Reed 753). In the first chapter, Vonnegut explains that "all this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on." (Vonnegut 1). Billy Pilgrim is not even mentioned until [written at E. Alamance H.S. in '07] twenty-two pages later, in the beginning of chapter two. For the rest of the novel, Vonnegut often interrupts the plot to say, "I was there," or to quote himself. Mostly due to these new techniques, "*Slaughterhouse-Five* [is] Vonnegut's conscious leap toward a more personally revealing fiction." (Brucker 1423). Like many writers, Vonnegut uses his writing as an outlet to his painful and disturbing memories. The firebombing of Dresden was certainly painful and disturbing. He intentionally makes little sense of the bombing, and he often juxtaposes silly statements ("The boots fit perfectly. Billy Pilgrim was Cinderella, and

Cinderella was Billy Pilgrim.”) with more serious or grisly ones (“I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen...and I have lit my way in a prison at night with candles from the fat of human beings [written at E. Alamance H.S. in ‘07] who were butchered by the brothers and fathers of those school girls who were boiled.”), and it ends up sounding how a (somewhat naïve) first-hand account would (Vonnegut 116, 145).

Time is generally considered a constant; however, the wandering time frame is patterned after the human perception of time. Vonnegut once said that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written in the “telegraphic schizophrenic manner” of the Tralfamadorians. Indeed, “*Slaughterhouse-Five* is written as a fragmented, non-chronological narrative to emphasize the confusion and absurdity of contemporary life. Cyclical in structure, this work randomly shifts through time and space...” (“Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.” 404). Billy Pilgrim’s becoming “unstuck” in time and Vonnegut’s repetition of certain phrases seem irrelevant and non sequitur. At times, certain colors (for example: black and orange) show up when Billy leaves one time and goes to another, and the phrase “so it goes,” is repeated at [written at E. Alamance H.S. in ‘07] the death of every character (or drink). Silly analogies are used to help the reader understand how the Tralfamadorians view time all at once, and the novel often reflects that same ideal of dealing with the passing of time. In chapter three alone, Billy moves from being captured by the Germans, to working as an optometrist, back to his experience as a prisoner, to a bad neighborhood near the office he suddenly owns, to a Lion’s Club meeting, to his empty house, once again to being a prisoner, and finally to being abducted by the Tralfamadorians. The ending of this chapter should be a cliff-hanger, “Is Billy abducted?” “Will the

Tralfamadorians run horrible tests on him?” but Vonnegut has already told his audience that yes, Billy does get abducted and no, the Tralfamadorians don’t run cruel tests on him, given the opportunity. Although the reader already knows what will happen, he or she will continue [written at E. Alamance H.S. in ‘07] reading because it is an interesting novel, and the confusion in time merely increases the readers’ interest.

Of the literary techniques Kurt Vonnegut uses, the most influential to *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an inconstant time stream and narrative bordering on memoirs. Vonnegut remains one of America’s best contemporary writers, even after his death. Now that he’s “up in Heaven,” who will grab the torch of being “America’s greatest satirist?”

## Works Cited

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