
The Only Planet with a Concept of Free Will

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been the subject of much attention and debate since its release. Its wide range of topics such as critique of the American government and discussion of existentialism have made it an extremely controversial piece of literature. One passage in particular has been the catalyst of altercation among critics and readers alike: Billy Pilgrim's discussion with a Tralfamadorian about the idea of free will, which becomes a theme throughout the novel. I believe that Vonnegut intended to convey through *Slaughterhouse-Five* that "free will" is just that: an idea. Over the course of Billy Pilgrim's story, he repeatedly finds himself in situations in which he has no free will. The "and so it goes" theory of the Tralfamadorians represents the idea that we cannot change anything. While brief, the most significant point is that the Tralfamadorians tell Billy Pilgrim that our planet is the only one that has even a concept of free will. Through his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut conveys that "free will does" not actually exist: it is simply an illusion.

Frequently in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut puts Billy Pilgrims in positions in which he has little to no free will. One of these situations, the most important and the most obvious, is the fact that Pilgrim knows that Paul Lazzaro is going to kill him, that this is how he will die, and he can do nothing to change it. Secondly, Billy Pilgrim has no control over when or where he travels in time. Often, at random points in the book, he is thrown from his full-grown manhood to another point in his life, never when he is expecting to. For example, in chapter four, Billy is innocently taking a shower when all of a sudden he involuntarily travel through time. "And Billy zoomed back in time to his infancy He was a baby who had just been bathed by his mother...And then [he] was a middle-aged optometrist again, playing hacker's gold this time" (Vonnegut 85). In this passage, Billy has no choice whether he time travels, and does not intend to. As this happens repeatedly, his sporadic time travel becomes less of a surprise both to the reader and to Billy; it becomes something that is expected and accepted. This acceptance on Billy's and the reader's part displays that the lack of self-control becomes something that is natural. This symbolizes that free will doesn't exist at all.

At several other points in the book, Billy Pilgrim represents the non-existence of free will in our society. When he is a little boy, Billy's father forces him to learn to swim by using the sink-or-swim method, by throwing him into the deep end of the pool. Billy is terrified, but finds that he loves the bottom of the pool. He finds it beautiful and thinks he hears music. Then, much to his resentment, Billy is rescued from the bottom of the pool by his father. In this passage Billy not only does not possess free will because he has no choice about whether he is thrown into the pool, but he is also taken from the bottom contrary to his own wishes. When Billy is drafted into the war, this also against his free will. In one passage, as a soldier, Billy feels like a joke: he has

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no helmet or overcoat, his body is gangling and weak, and his shoes are cheap civilian's shoes. "Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down. The involuntary dancing, up-and-down" (Vonnegut 33). In this quote, Billy is marching through the streets of Germany, and the description of his "involuntary dancing" gives the reader an image of him as a puppet under the control of the military. This is another force that removes Billy Pilgrim's free will.

In addition to all of Billy Pilgrim's previously elaborated experiences, aspects of his struggle as an American soldier symbolize Billy's lack of free will and the lack of control over life the human race has as a whole. For example, Billy is an ill-trained, improperly dressed soldier who doesn't want to be one at all, yet he survives the Dresden tragedy while many who are much better soldiers than him die. On the other hand, if he trained, worked hard, wore the appropriate garb, and became a motivated and loyal soldier, Billy still may very well have died during Dresden. This point reveals the lack of control that yield human effort to be pointless and free will to be an illusion.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim's repeated experiences of deduction of his free will show that it is only an illusion. Billy Pilgrim's character believes that he has free will, but it becomes clear that he does not. Meanwhile, the Tralfamadorians of planet Tralfamadore attempt to teach Billy that free will does not exist, implying that he is not that only one without it - it's the entire universe. The Tralfamadorians believe that we have no control over the path that has been chosen for us. They have no emotions related to death, because they feel that there is nothing they can do to change it. Since every moment exists infinitely in the fourth dimension, they are completely comfortable with death because they can visit their loved ones in moments passed. This where their saying, "and so it goes" comes from. Every times someone dies, the Tralfamadorian outlook on the subject is, "And so it goes." Vonnegut uses this statement repeatedly throughout the story. It sends the message that because we have no choice but to die, death should be accepted. The "and so it goes" phrase that becomes a motto of the book highlights the fact that death is an everyday reality that proves that there is no such thing as free will. If everything we supposedly "choose" to do leads up to an inevitable, uncontrollable end to our life, then is it not true that in the long run, we ultimately have no will over what becomes of us? Through the Tralfamadorians' outlook on death, "and so it goes," Vonnegut uses the theme of death in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to send a message about the futility of free will.

The most obvious and most notable divulgence of free will's nonexistence in the story takes while Billy Pilgrim is under custody of the Tralfamadorians. A Tralfamadorian explains to Billy the theories elaborated in the previous paragraph: he explains to Billy that we are all "bugs in amber" (Vonnegut 86). "Earthlings ... [tell] how other events may be achieved or avoided ... all time is time. It cannot be changed" (Vonnegut 87). In this quote, the Tralfamadorian is explaining that humans like to believe that we can avoid, instigate, or alter the course of events.

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He says that humans are wrong: we are unable to change our futures no matter how hard we work or what steps we take. As a conclusion to the conversation, the Tralfamadorian adds, "I've visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (Vonnegut 86). In this dialogue, Vonnegut conveys the message of this conversation with finality. Free will is an idea made up by the human race. It does not actually exist.

Once the reader has read this passage, the question of the existence of free will becomes a noticeable theme throughout the story. Vonnegut included this extremely significant passage to reveal that theme. This scene's importance determines its influence on the rest of the book. Once the theme of free will has been introduced, it is noticeably supported by Billy's character's lack of free will throughout his story, by the lack of control of the victims of the Dresden firebombing, and by theories of the Tralfamadorians such as the "and so it goes" outlook on death. Vonnegut did not include these details by mistake. All of these aspects make clear that a huge message of Slaughterhouse-Five is that the human generated idea of "free will" is simply an illusion.

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