
The Role of Foreshadowing of Events in Plot's Construction

THIS IS A NOVEL SOMEWHAT IN THE TELEGRAPHIC SCHIZOPHRENIC MANNER OF TALES OF THE PLANET TRALFAMADORE

The foreshadowing of events in Kurt Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse Five' is as much a subtle indication of things to come as it is an expository technique whereby the major plot points of the story are blatantly spelled out as facts, leaving us to proceed through the novel and watch helplessly as each of those points is hit, in turn, as promised. In addition, however, foreshadowing is more than just a structural technique used by the narrator: it is also a defining aspect of Billy Pilgrim himself - it is a part of his character, as his knowledge of future events influences his behavior throughout the story - and, on a grander scale, foreshadowing is woven into the very fabric of the narrative, for this is a story in which past, present, and future intersect and all events that occur are known before they take place.

"I've finished my war book now," announces the narrator - perhaps Vonnegut himself, though we cannot be sure - in the opening section of the novel, and already the end is in sight, for we know now that the story is told in flashback, and that the chronological sequence of events concludes with the writing of the very novel that we are reading. The narrator continues:

The next one I write is going to be fun.

This one is a failure, and had to be, because it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet?

And sure enough, we turn to the next page to see the novel proper beginning with the words: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time," and when we turn to the last page we see the novel ending with the chirping of a bird: "Poo-tee-weet?" Combined with the circular effect of the song of Yon Yonson, which ends as it begins and goes on forever into eternity, and with the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

narrator's observation that "Somebody was playing with the clocks... The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass and then it would twitch again" - we see that this is most certainly a novel structured somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.

But what exactly is that supposed to mean? On the very first page of the novel, before the story even begins, we are told of the planet Tralfamadore as if its nature should already be known to us, yet only when we are informed that it is "where the flying saucers come from" are we then able to infer that it is a place with a civilization that is of some consequence to the story - for we infer also that if the flying saucers are coming from Tralfamadore, they must also be going to another place, presumably Earth; but still, these inferences and impressions are as much as we can deduce from this abrupt introduction to Tralfamadore. Similarly, we see that the novel is subtitled "The Children's Crusade" - why, we do not know. Neither of these things has any significance to the story the first time they are brought to our attention, but later, when they are explained - as the planet on which the 'fourth-dimension' aliens reside and as the title that the narrator promises his friend Mary he will use for his book, respectively - in retrospect, their significance becomes great. In addition to the method of foreshadowing already discussed, the novel's foreshadowing now also takes a form more subtle than the spelling out of certain events, based upon assumption of knowledge already held rather than the exposition of knowledge not yet attained. In this instance, instead of candidly telling us what will happen in the novel, the narrator speaks of things that have already happened, thus foreshadowing their eventual occurrence later in the story. Vonnegut's dual use of both major, precognitive foreshadowing and of minor, retrospective foreshadowing is not a common technique to use for foreshadowing in particular or for fiction in general - unless you happen to come from Tralfamadore.

"The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore," Billy Pilgrim writes in a letter, "was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past. ...All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. [The Tralfamadoreans] can see how permanent the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them." The style of the novel, therefore, reflects the perspectives of the Tralfamadoreans, telling us about future events in one instance and then presuming that we have already been told about them in another; sometimes specifically stating what will take place in the future - a more 'active' foreshadowing technique - and sometimes assuming that events that will take place in the future have already happened and that we know about them, and proceeding from there to talk about them as if they were familiar to us - a more 'passive' foreshadowing technique. The effect of these two types of foreshadowing is a general feeling of ambivalence toward the future, largely empty of any kind of emotional connection to events that have yet to occur.

"His name was Howard W. Campbell, Jr. He would later hang himself while awaiting trial as a

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

war criminal" the future is written, and is inevitable, and so it goes. "Billy predicts his own death within an hour. He laughs about it, invited the crowd to laugh with him. 'It is high time I was dead,' he says. 'Many years ago,' he said, 'a certain man promised to have me killed. ...Tonight he will keep his promise'" and he does, and Billy goes down just as he said he would, and his death is expected, planned, premeditated, inevitable, and so it goes. We infer this not only from the words Billy uses, but from the change in tense on the narrator's part: Billy says "It is high time I was dead," but he said "Many years ago, a certain man promised to have me killed"; we move from the present into the past within the space of a single sentence. Other instances of foreshadowing rest on a similar level of subtlety: "Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day" and "Billy sat down in the waiting room. He wasn't a widower yet" - not yet, but now we know that he will be, and, when the time comes that he is a widower, we expect it to happen, and the event is once again imbued with a sense of inevitability, and is therefore drained of the emotional power that spontaneity would otherwise bring. "So it goes," notes the narrator anytime anyone or anything dies. Death is not a significant event but is instead a mere formality, and this thinking reflects not only the thoughts of the Tralfamadorians, but also those of the confused and bewildered and desensitized American soldiers who, like the narrator, were - are - will be caught by surprise in the bombing of Dresden. Except one.

"Billy, with his memories of the future, knew that the city would be smashed to smithereens and then burned in about thirty more days. He knew, too, that most of the people watching him would soon be dead. So it goes." Yet as Billy marches through the streets of Dresden, he is part of a "light opera" - or more than that, "Billy Pilgrim was the star [of the light opera]." Earlier - or later - during his time in the Tralfamadorian zoo, Billy asks the Tralfamadorians why they don't have war on their planet. "Today we [have peace]," a Tralfamadorian tells him. "On other days we have wars as horrible as any you've ever seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do about them" - once again, emotional detachment from an inevitable future influences the behavior of this character and the narrator's attitude towards him (or it) - "so we simply don't look at [wars]. We ignore them. ...That's one thing Earthlings might learn to do: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones."

What we have in Billy Pilgrim, then, is a character who is foreshadowing incarnate, who, with "memories of the future," is able to look at a soon-to-be-decimated city with a smile on his face while acting like a "star" instead of taking the opportunity to warn the citizens of that city about the inevitability of their fate. The actions of this character are then related to us by a third-party observer who earlier described himself as "a pillar of salt," alluding to the Biblical tale of Lot's wife and therefore painting himself with the same brush as one who cannot help but look back and reflect on the past. This then equates to a structure in which we have, firstly, the observation that in addition to being a novelistic technique on the part of the narrator, foreshadowing is also a character trait that impresses itself upon the very essence of Billy Pilgrim, whose knowledge of what will take place is an influence on the things he does and does

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

not choose to do; and secondly, a comparison between those individuals who look at the world the way the Tralfamadorians do, and those who do not: the narrator, a figure in the present, forever concentrates his thoughts on the past, and he is contrasted against Billy, a figure in the past, whose "memories of the future" allow him to concentrate his thoughts not on Dresden, even though he is there when it is about to be bombed, but on the good times, and the light opera is a good time, and this ability to choose which events to concentrate on allows him to smile and act like a star even though he knows what this city has coming to it. With events being foreshadowed in Billy Pilgrim's actual personal chronological timeline in turn influencing the essence of his character, as well as events being foreshadowed in terms of the order of events in which the narrator introduces us to his character, Billy is able to escape from the misery of Dresden into happier times while on the other hand the narrator, even though he lives in happier times in the present with his old friends, still cannot, nor will ever be able to, escape the misery of Dresden, and the misery of the past.

The past, by necessity, defines the entire novel and gives it a framework around which it is structured, and moreover, it allows for foreshadowing in general: future events in a novel of this sort are meaningless without some past indication of the importance of their occurrence; otherwise, it would be nothing more than a straightforward account of 'real life,' and the story of a man who has "come unstuck in time" is anything but realistic. The very first chapter, for instance, outlines the novel as a whole, with a vague, 'passive' reference to "the slaughterhouse" - given the way the subject is treated with such familiarity, the narrator assumes we have made at least some acquaintance with the subject, and because we know we have not yet, we expect to be acquainted with it later on - and the specific, 'active' statement that "One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his," which doesn't pay off until the very end of the novel: "Edgar Derby was caught with a teapot he had taken from the catacombs. He was arrested for plundering. He was tried and shot." The first chapter also contains a throwaway line that forecasts the appearance of a significant character: "Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war." Consider also the way that characters, too, are introduced almost as arbitrary plot elements whose only apparent function is to flesh out the story with more background detail - the writer Kilgore Trout, for instance, and the actress Montana Wildhack - yet they metamorphose into major players as the story progresses. But aside from gimmick value or simple evidence of design, what purpose do such introductions and such throwaway lines buried in the prose contribute to the overall effect of the novel?

Consider now the way in which a Tralfamadorian novel is written and read: "Each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message - describing a situation, a scene. ...Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning,

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What [Tralfamadorians] love in [their] books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time."

The plane crash in Vermont of which Billy is the only survivor is foreshadowed, referred to first simply as "the plane crash" and expanded upon later. Billy's encounter with Montana Wildhack in the Tralfamadorian zoo is foreshadowed retrospectively when we realize that the words etched on Montana Wildhack's necklace are the same as those that are printed and framed and hung on the wall of Billy Pilgrim's optometry office many years later, even though the first time we encounter them chronologically is in that same office. Billy's public speeches on the subject of Tralfamadore are all foreshadowed in his letters, even if not explicitly: we know they are coming, or that they have already occurred and that we are about to have the blanks filled in. Billy can see all of these events, which is why none of them surprise him and he always plays by the rules of time: "I didn't think the time was ripe," he tells his daughter when she asks him why he has never spoken about Tralfamadore to her. But the narrator - and we, ourselves - cannot see all of these events at one time, which is why this is a novel only somewhat in the style of the tales of Tralfamadore. Billy, however, plays along with the demands of time and fate, which is why he understands that the events he later encounters are not only inevitable, but are necessarily inevitable: things cannot happen any other way.

If Slaughterhouse Five is indeed "a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore" then, with its myriad of throwaway lines and seemingly-insignificant characters, each of which has a pay-off later in the book although not necessarily later in the chronological sequence of events that constitute the story, Slaughterhouse Five itself might also be read in the way of Tralfamadorian novels, to "produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" by concentrating the potency of each "brief, urgent [scene]" and the rhythm that is established by the interweaving texture they produce - to the point where every significant event in the novel is, by its very nature, an instance of foreshadowing. By necessity they must all be, for they are seen through the eyes of a man for whom past, present, and future intersect, whose story is told by another man - "a pillar of salt" who spends his days forever reflecting on the moments that have led up to his present life: moments that, had he but seen them in the way Billy Pilgrim was able to, would have been revealed to him as the foreshadowings of fate and the antithesis of the Earthling-only conception of 'free will' that they are.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)