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The Life of Kurt Vonnegut

1922-2007



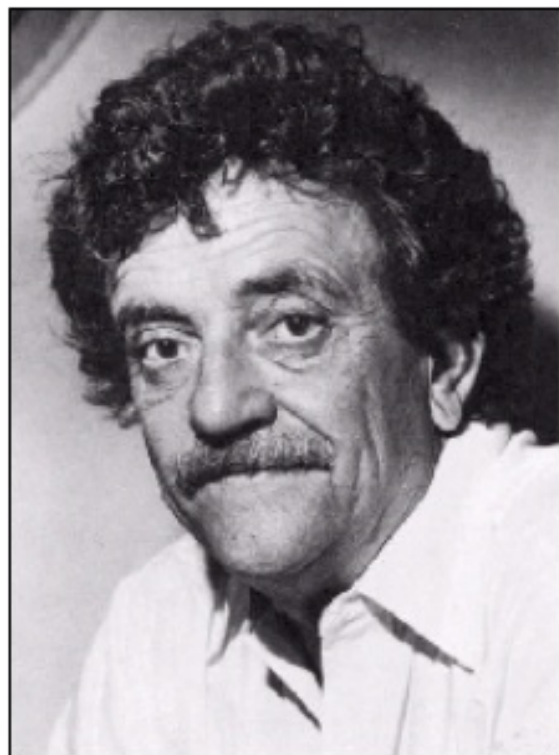
All the artwork is Vonnegut's, by the way.

Early Life and Childhood

- Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. You'll see that many of his novels and short stories are set in or around his hometown. Also, he often refers to "Hoosiers" (people from Indiana).
- After high school, Vonnegut went to Cornell University and majored in chemistry. In many of his works, you'll notice that he uses scientific experiments as catalysts for action (or to end the world, at times).
- In college, Vonnegut enlisted in the Army and they moved him to a technical institute and then to the University of Tennessee to study mechanical engineering.
- When Vonnegut was 22 years old, his mother committed suicide. You might notice the lack of mothers in his literature. Occasionally, they'll even commit suicide.

Kurt Vonnegut

In one of his more well-known books, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut explores determinism versus free will to ask what I think is one of the questions we have to spend more time thinking about. Are we actors on a stage that we design, control, and engage in a greater stage upon which we have less control? I don't claim to be a literary expert, but I appreciate how Vonnegut takes his audience to a way of thinking about the world that reminds us that we have choices that contribute to our lives and that there are some things we cannot control. This is where I went with it. Perhaps that says more about me than him. "So it goes."



Personal Life

- After WWII, Vonnegut married his childhood sweetheart, Jane Marie Cox. In 1970, they separated and Vonnegut began living with Jill Krementz, a photographer. Later, they married.
- Vonnegut had three children from his first marriage, but he adopted three of his sister's children after his sister died. Also, he adopted a seventh child with his second wife.
- Eventually, Vonnegut became known as one of America's great writers and became a professor at Harvard.
- Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007, after falling down a flight of stairs in his home and suffering massive head trauma.

8 Tips from Kurt Vonnegut

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

Important Works

- Vonnegut's first short story was "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," which will be the first story we will read as a class (by Wednesday).
- His first novel was *Player Piano*, in which human workers have been largely replaced by machines.

Other novels (some of them, anyway):

- *The Sirens of Titan*: A
- *Mother Night*: A
- *Cat's Cradle*: A-plus
- *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: A
- *Slaughterhouse-Five*: A-plus
- *Welcome to the Monkey House*: B-minus
- *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*: D
- *Breakfast of Champions*: C
- *Slapstick*: D
- *Jailbird*: A
- *Palm Sunday*: C

The grades were given by Vonnegut; we'll be reading *Cat's Cradle* and *Mother Night*.

Theme 1:

The Destructiveness of War

- Whether we read *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a science-fiction novel or a quasi-autobiographical moral statement, we cannot ignore the destructive properties of war, since the firebombing of the German town of Dresden during World War II situates all of the other seemingly random events.
- From his swimming lessons at the YMCA to his speeches at the Lions Club to his captivity in Tralfamadore, Billy Pilgrim shifts in and out of the meat locker in Dresden, where he very narrowly survives in a city where fire is raining from the sky.

- The destructiveness of the war is evoked in subtle ways. For instance, Billy is quite successful in his postwar exploits from a materialistic point of view: he is president of the Lions Club, works as a prosperous optometrist, lives in a thoroughly comfortable modern home, and has fathered two children.
- While Billy seems to have led a productive postwar life, these seeming markers of success speak only to its surface.
- He gets his job not because of any particular prowess but as a result of his father-in-law's efforts. More important, at one point in the novel, Billy walks in on his son and realizes that they are unfamiliar with each other.
- Beneath the splendor of his success lies a man too war-torn to understand it. In fact, Billy's name, a diminutive form of William, indicates that he is more an immature boy than a man.

- Vonnegut, then, injects the science-fiction thread, including the Tralfamadorians, to indicate how greatly the war has disrupted Billy's existence.
- It seems that Billy may be hallucinating about his experiences with the Tralfamadorians as a way to escape a world destroyed by war—a world that he cannot understand.
- The Tralfamadorian theory of the fourth dimension seems too convenient a device to be more than just a way for Billy to rationalize all the death with he has seen face-to-face.
- Billy is a traumatized man who cannot come to terms with the destructiveness of war without invoking a far-fetched and impossible theory to which he can shape the world.

Theme 2: The Illusion of Free Will

- In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorians, with their absurdly humorous toilet-plunger shape, to discuss the philosophical question of whether free will exists.
- These aliens live with the knowledge of the fourth dimension, which, they say, contains all moments of time occurring and reoccurring endlessly and simultaneously.
- Because they believe that all moments of time have already happened (since all moments repeat themselves endlessly), they possess an attitude of acceptance about their fates, figuring that they are powerless to change them.
- Only on Earth, according to the Tralfamadorians, is there talk of free will, since humans, they claim, mistakenly think of time as a linear progression.

- Throughout his life, Billy runs up against forces that counter his free will.
- When Billy is a child, his father lets him sink into the deep end of a pool in order to teach him how to swim. Much to his father's dismay, however, Billy prefers the bottom of the pool, but, against his free will to stay there, he is rescued.
- Later, Billy is drafted into the war against his will. Even as a soldier, Billy is a joke, lacking training, supplies, and proper clothing.

- Even while Vonnegut admits the inevitability of death, with or without war, he also tells us that he has instructed his sons not to participate in massacres or in the manufacture of machinery used to carry them out.
- As Billy learns to accept the Tralfamadorian teachings, we see how his actions indicate the futility of free will.
- Even if Billy were to train hard, wear the proper uniform, and be a good soldier, he might still die like the others in Dresden who are much better soldiers than he.
- That he survives the incident as an improperly trained joke of a soldier is a testament to the forces that make free will and human effort an illusion.

Theme 3: The Importance of Sight

- True sight is an important concept that is difficult to define for *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
- As an optometrist in Ilium, Billy has the professional duty of correcting the vision of his patients.
- If we extend the idea of seeing beyond the literal scope of Billy's profession, we can see that Vonnegut sets Billy up with several different lenses with which to correct the world's nearsightedness.
- One of the ways Billy can contribute to this true sight is through his knowledge of the fourth dimension, which he gains from the aliens at Tralfamadore.
- He believes in the Tralfamadorians' view of time—that all moments of time exist simultaneously and repeat themselves endlessly. He thus believes that he knows what will happen in the future (because everything has already happened and will continue to happen in the same way).

- One can also argue that Billy lacks sight completely.
- He goes to war, witnesses horrific events, and becomes mentally unstable as a result. He has a shaky grip on reality and at random moments experiences overpowering flashbacks to other parts of his life.
- His sense that aliens have captured him and kept him in a zoo before sending him back to Earth may be the product of an overactive imagination.
- Given all that Billy has been through, it is logical to believe that he has gone insane, and it makes sense to interpret these bizarre alien encounters as hallucinatory incidents triggered by mundane events that somehow create an association with past traumas.
- Looking at Billy this way, we can see him as someone who has lost true sight and lives in a cloud of hallucinations and self-doubt. Such a view creates the **irony that one employed to correct the myopic view of others is actually himself quite blind.**

Motifs

- *Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

Motif 1: “So it goes”

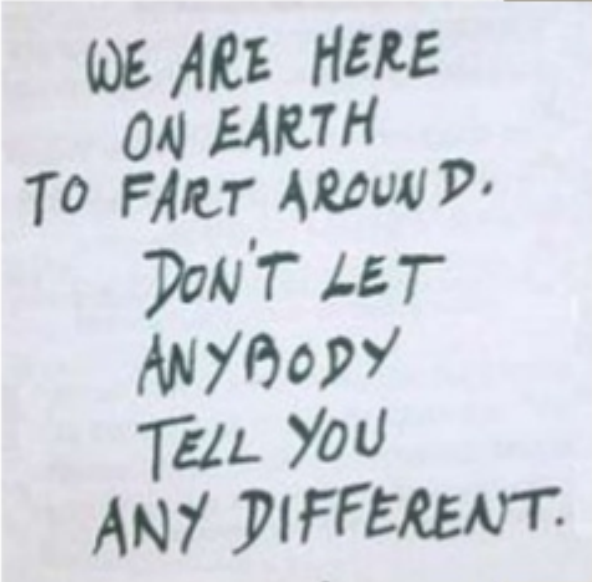
- The phrase “So it goes” follows every mention of death in the novel, equalizing all of them, whether they are natural, accidental, or intentional, and whether they occur on a massive scale or on a very personal one.
- The phrase reflects a kind of comfort in the Tralfamadorian idea that although a person may be dead in a particular moment, he or she is alive in all the other moments of his or her life, which coexist and can be visited over and over through time travel.
- At the same time, though, the repetition of the phrase keeps a tally of the force of death throughout the novel, thus pointing out the tragic inevitability of death.

Motif 2: The Author as a Character

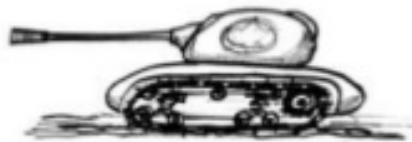
- Vonnegut frames his novel with chapters in which he speaks in his own voice about his experience of war.
- This decision indicates that the fiction has an intimate connection with Vonnegut's life and convictions. Once that connection is established, however, Vonnegut backs off and lets the story of Billy Pilgrim take over.
- Throughout the book, Vonnegut briefly inserts himself as a character in the action: in the latrine at the POW camp, in the corpse mines of Dresden, on the phone when he mistakenly dials Billy's number.
- These appearances anchor Billy's life to a larger reality and highlight his struggle to fit into the human world.

Religion

- Vonnegut described himself variously as a skeptic, freethinker, humanist, Unitarian Universalist, agnostic, and atheist. He disbelieved in the supernatural, considered religious doctrine to be "so much arbitrary, clearly invented balderdash," and believed people were motivated to join religions out of loneliness.
- Vonnegut wrote: "I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without expectations of rewards or punishments after I am dead." Keep this idea in mind as you try to figure out the moral message behind some of his fiction.



WE ARE HERE
ON EARTH
TO FART AROUND.
DON'T LET
ANYBODY
TELL YOU
ANY DIFFERENT.



Politics

- Vonnegut has been accused of being a terrorist (especially after 9/11), a communist, and of being unAmerican.
- Vonnegut was openly against the Vietnam War, signing the “Writers and Editors War Tax Protest” pledge in 1968, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest.
- Vonnegut was openly against the Iraq War before his death, calling the Bush administration “power-drunk chimpanzees.”
- That said, Vonnegut didn’t seem to be a supporter of the Democratic party, either. Speaking of Bush and Kerry in 2004, he said that “no matter which one wins, we will have a Skull and Bones President at a time when entire vertebrate species, because of how we have poisoned the topsoil, the waters and the atmosphere, are becoming, hey presto, nothing but skulls and bones.” (Skull and Bones refers to a secret society at Yale.)

WWII Experience

- During the Battle of the Bulge (December 19, 1944), Vonnegut was imprisoned in Dresden. He was the leader of the other POWs, probably because he spoke some German. While a prisoner, he witnessed the fire bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut writes about war often, including Dresden.
- As a POW, Vonnegut stayed in an underground slaughterhouse meat locker called *Schlachthof Fünf*, which translates to “Slaughterhouse Five.” You might have read that book.
- In May of 1945, Vonnegut was liberated and was awarded a Purple Heart; Vonnegut claims he received the award for a “ludicrously negligible wound,” later writing in *Timequake* that he was given the decoration after suffering a case of frostbite.

After the War



- Vonnegut went to the University of Chicago for graduate school to study anthropology; he also worked at the City News Bureau of Chicago. Not surprisingly, you'll see many journalists and other writers in his fiction.
- Vonnegut claimed he was a poor anthropology student; according to his account in *Bamboo Snuff Box*, the university rejected his thesis. Later, he turned in *Cat's Cradle* as his thesis and it was accepted. (We'll read the book.)
- After leaving Chicago, Vonnegut went to Schenectady, New York (a common setting in his stories).
- Vonnegut wrote fiction with little success, and until the mid-1950s, continued to work as a journalist. At one point, Vonnegut worked for *Sports Illustrated*, where he was assigned to write a piece on a racehorse that had jumped a fence and tried to run away. Vonnegut wrote, "The horse jumped over the fucking fence" and quit.
- In 1957, Vonnegut moved to Barnstable, Massachusetts, a town on Cape Cod, where he worked as a car salesman for a year.



True terror is
to wake up one
morning and
discover that your
high school class
is running the country.

-K. Vonnegut