Max Petite

Ms. Donovan

English IV

September 1, 2023

An Unstuck Identity

Our lives play out linearly, one moment flowing into the next. This continuity, while convenient, can obscure the gradual changes we undergo in both identity and purpose. Because these alterations are incremental, we often overlook how different we become over time. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut challenges this perception by introducing us to Billy Pilgrim, who experiences his life in a fragmented, non-linear fashion. Through Billy's disjointed timeline, Vonnegut highlights the drastic shifts in purpose and identity that people undergo throughout their lives. Two of the main roles Billy fills are that of a World War II soldier and a philosopher.

During his time in World War II, specifically in the aftermath of the Battle of the Bulge, Billy Pilgrim finds himself disoriented and stranded behind enemy lines. He's part of a small group of American soldiers, all similarly lost but better equipped for survival. In this precarious situation, Vonnegut vividly captures Billy's existential void, describing him as "empty-handed, bleakly ready for death." At this moment, Billy is not a soldier or a hero; he is barely alive and simply waiting for death to find him. Unlike his companions, he carries no weapon, no supplies, and seems devoid of the will to fight or flee. The only reason Billy stays with the group is that one of the other soldiers believes he will be labeled a war hero if he leads someone as weak and pathetic as Billy through enemy lines. Billy's purpose, if one can even call it that, is survival, though even this is marked by a bleak readiness to accept death as an end. This stage of Billy's life paints a picture of a man disconnected from the world around him, marching without a destination, fighting without a cause. His identity is almost entirely swallowed by the chaos of war, leaving behind a shell of a person who is "bleakly ready" for the end.

In the years following World War II, Billy Pilgrim undergoes a significant transformation, heavily influenced by his claimed experiences on Tralfamadore, an alien planet where time is perceived all at once rather than linearly. No longer the empty vessel "bleakly ready for death," Billy now embraces the role of a public speaker and philosopher, driven to share his newfound wisdom derived from Tralfamadorian philosophy. In one of his speeches—real or imagined—he asserts, “If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I’ve said,” concluding with the cryptic phrase: “Farewell, hello, farewell, hello.” These words encapsulate Billy's new purpose: to share an understanding of time and existence that defies conventional human thought.

This shift in Billy's identity and purpose is vast. He transitions from an essentially purposeless shell of a person merely surviving to someone with a clear idea of who he is, what he believes, and what he wants to do with his life, even if it seems incredibly unusual. Vonnegut does not present this change to the reader linearly, just as Billy does not experience it linearly. Instead, in the context of the narrative, Billy is at all moments both the soldier and the philosopher. Vonnegut also does not try to make these changes subtle; he jumps between time periods at a whim, and it is often unclear which version of Billy is being shown with each jump. This serves to highlight just how incredible these changes are because, if they were viewed linearly with all the subtle growth required along the way, they would seem less drastic.

Slaughterhouse-Five uses Billy's unique experience of life to remind us that our identities and purposes are malleable and ever-changing. From Billy's perspective, these things can literally change from moment to moment, but for regular people, Vonnegut is telling us to recognize how much we have changed by reflecting on our past selves while also experiencing the present.