

**Essay title:**

The 'trauma theorist' Cathy Caruth follows Freud in describing trauma as 'a break in the mind's experience of time'. How far is such emphasis on temporal disruption – on latency and belatedness, for example, or the relieving of the past in the present – helpful for thinking about the formal features of Second World War literature?

The notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable.  
– Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

All there is to say about a massacre [...] ‘Poo-tee-tweet?’<sup>2</sup> In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut boldly likens the mass bombing of Dresden to the arbitrary, unintelligible and ultimately illogical song of birds. In doing so, he highlights the absurdity of ‘the Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned’, yet ultimately, ‘so meaningless’.<sup>3</sup> Saturation bombs and high-explosives were dropped by Vonnegut’s own countrymen with the intention of annihilation and mass destruction. The bombing left more than 25,000 dead and the once-glorious city of Dresden in a state of ruins. No less significantly, it had a profound, personal impact on Vonnegut himself, leaving him ‘spiritually paralysed’, explaining the twenty-four year gap that would ensue between the bombing and the publishing of the novel.<sup>4</sup> One of the key defining characteristics of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, its lack of a central temporal reference point, serves as a formal representation of the irrationality of the massacre, as well as imitates the fragmentizing effect of trauma on the mind’s experience of time. Indeed, the protagonist Billy lives out time in a highly distorted manner – he becomes ‘unstuck in time’ (*SH*, p. 19), and repeatedly experiences the past in the present. In this way, Vonnegut suggests that the effects of trauma are not simply recounted, but are re-enacted and re-lived in full vividness within the mind. In addition, Vonnegut creates a circular temporal structure by removing any sense of coherency typically established by chronological order, thereby mangling notions of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (trans.) Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978) p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (London: Vintage, 2000) p. 16.

All subsequent references to *Slaughterhouse-Five* (*SH*) will be made to this version.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York: Random House, 2011) p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> Sukhbir Singh, *The Survivor in Contemporary American Fiction* (New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1991), p. 201.

cause-and-effect and elucidating the meaninglessness of war. In order to find a new way to convey the horror and represent the unthinkable, Vonnegut therefore goes beyond the thresholds of irony to '[alter] the fundamental processes of narrative itself', resulting in a 'new mode of perception that radically alters traditional concepts of time and morality.'<sup>5</sup>

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states: 'dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident'.<sup>6</sup> *Slaughterhouse-Five* takes the assertion that trauma brings one 'back' to the point of its origin and pursues it to an extreme, such that the re-experiencing of traumatic incidents do not merely occur in the dream-state but are experienced as if they were lived out in real time. As Billy lives out his ordinary suburban life in Ilium after the war, he is involuntarily projected physically into different terrifying episodes of his life. His experience fits Freud's diagnosis of a patient who cannot help but '[repeat] the repressed material as a *contemporary experience* instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past' (*emphasis added*).<sup>7</sup> For example, an abrupt burst of siren sound scares Billy in the midst of his workday and suddenly, 'he was back in World War Two again [...] A German was kicking his feet, telling him to wake up' (*SH*, p. 48). These traumatic episodes are not just confined to his war days – some are shown to originate from his childhood as well. At one point, while suffering from exhaustion during the war, he leans against a tree and is suddenly hurled to a

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<sup>5</sup> W. R. Allen, *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII*, (trans.) James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 18.

distressing moment in his early years when his father throws him into the deep end of the pool: 'It was like an execution. Billy was numb' (*SH*, p. 35). Moments like these when Billy re-lives harrowing experiences can be read as 'a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli [...] [which reinstates] the old, naïve theory of shock'.<sup>8</sup> The disjointedness in Billy's experience of time to the point that he feels he is 'still very much alive in the past' (*SH*, p. 22) is therefore symptomatic of his suffering of great traumatic ordeals. As Edelstein writes, Billy's time travel is 'an excellent metaphor for a man's inability to keep the horrible experiences of his past from invading the relative serenity of his present.'<sup>9</sup>

As a result, Billy's experience of time does not conform to a forward, linear trajectory where moments in time are arranged like 'beads on a string [...] [once] gone it is gone forever' (*SH*, p. 22). Rather, the traumatic incidents he endures in the past are shown to have ramifications rippling beyond the point of its initial occurrence throughout Billy's life. Caruth asserts that 'to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed, motifs like the 'blue and ivory feet' and 'mustard gas and roses' stench of war corpses (*SH*, pp. 54, 176) surface repeatedly in Billy's consciousness even during mundane moments of post-war life, showing how the past is never confined to the past but continually impedes into the present. Even the diamond ring worn on Valencia's wedding finger is revealed to be a memento of the war (*SH*, p. 88). The lingering effect of trauma even after the war implies the futility of any attempts to pin down a traumatic incident to any one specific time. Vonnegut

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<sup>8</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 62. Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Edelstein, 'Slaughter-house Five: Time Out of Joint' in *College Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1974), p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction' in Cathy Caruth (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) pp. 4-5.

expresses this through his satirical treatment of formal markers of time, bordering, at times, on the comical: “*Goodness me, the clock has struck – Alackaday, and fuck my luck.*” (*SH*, p. 80) Implicit in the joke is a critique of people’s overreliance on ‘[believing] whatever clocks said – and calendars’ (*SH*, p. 17), as demonstrated by Vonnegut’s wife who ‘always has to know the time’ (*SH*, p. 6).

Like the story of Cinderella, whose fate reverses at the exact strike of the clock at midnight, the tendency to chart human experience in terms of formal indicators of time implies that anything outside the indicated period signals a change in state when in reality, as Vonnegut writes, ‘we do live our lives simultaneously.’<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this is the underlying principle of modernist novels written in stream of consciousness like Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, which seek to reproduce the ‘mind’s simultaneous blending of the past through memory, the present through perception and the future through anticipation’.<sup>12</sup> The disjuncture between the rigidity of said time and the malleability of experienced time is further emphasized in the portrayal of Vonnegut’s wait in a motel, where a single second in “Earthling” time felt like ‘a year’ (*SH*, p. 17). This, in combination with the absurd image of the Tralfamadorian aliens ‘making the electric clocks in the dome go fast, then slow, then fast again’ (*SH*, p. 171) in order to entertain themselves, further concretizes our sense of Vonnegut’s conviction of the senselessness of our tendency to define time. Even at the very end of the novel, Vonnegut refuses to chronologize the events of the Dresden bombing, purposefully choosing to use ambiguous time indicators instead: ‘Somewhere in there the poor old high school teacher [...] was tried and shot. [...] And somewhere in there was springtime.’ (*SH*, p. 177)

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<sup>11</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters Fauna & Granfalloon (Opinions)* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 84.

His stance sets the foundation for a larger critique on the insistence of historians and official authorities to memorialize and chart events of war in definite referential terms. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth explains that trauma and the belated and repetitive nature of its rendering results in history becoming ‘no longer straightforwardly referential’.<sup>13</sup> Like Caruth, Vonnegut likewise stresses the inadequacy of ‘simple models of experience and reference’ through his critical portrayal of historians and official war accounts.<sup>14</sup> The Harvard historian Rumfoord is shown to rely on official documents such as the testimonies of major war generals to obtain an “objective” understanding of the war – documents filled with dates, death tolls and hard facts to justify courses of action. Despite Rumfoord’s expertise, Vonnegut casts the establishment figure in a highly critical light. He is characterized as arrogant and intolerant, undermining our impression of his credibility. Moreover, the cold language and bombardment of facts inherent in these accounts – what Peter Freese calls ‘inhuman book keeping’ – pale in comparison to the vividness and terror of Billy’s subjective account, effectively summarized in a single line: ‘I was there.’ (*SH*, p. 159)<sup>15</sup> The line is echoed by Vonnegut himself, ‘I was there. O’Hare was there.’ (*SH*, p. 175), and its starkness emphasizes that any attempts to explain the impact of the war in facts and numbers will always leave out the inextricable horrors of personal experience, something far more difficult to define. Caruth writes, ‘[trauma] is intricately bound up with its refusal of historical boundaries’, since ‘its truth is bound up with its crisis of truth.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>15</sup> Peter Freese, ‘Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five or, How to Storify an Atrocity’ in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009) p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Caruth, ‘Introduction’ in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 8.

This crisis of truth stems primarily from the latency of trauma, which further complicates the task of historical representation. Caruth defines the term as the period during which the effects of the traumatic experience are not apparent.<sup>17</sup> Vonnegut reveals his experience with latency during the immediate period of his return home from the war:

I thought it would be easy to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen [...] [but] not many words about Dresden came from my mind [...] how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been. (*SH*, p. 2).

Despite his best efforts, Vonnegut is unable to recall or communicate his experience in detail. Similarly, Billy likens his war experience to a 'dream' he can only recall 'shimmeringly' (*SH*, pp. 101, 145), as if a translucent veil permanently obscures his vision. Their accounts agree with Freud's assertion that the trauma patient 'cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him.'<sup>18</sup> This uncertainty is manifested in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by a shrouding ambiguity that is never fully resolved. Indeed, the novel's first line immediately sets the tentative tone: 'All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true.' (*SH*, p. 1) Freese explains, 'This laconic statement constitutes a disturbing violation of traditional reader expectations and creates considerable ontological insecurity.'<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the narrator's refusal to commit anything said to fact is characteristic of meta-fiction, a term describing a text which self-consciously draws attention to itself as artefact, thereby challenging the traditional boundaries dividing fiction and reality.

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<sup>17</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Freese, 'Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* or, How to Storify an Atrocity', p. 25.

The boundary between fact and fiction is blurred further in instances where Vonnegut undermines the telling of Billy's story with a skeptical 'he says' (*SH*, pp. 19, 116, 173):

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. [...] He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

He says. (*SH*, p. 19)

His use of 'a reporting instead of a narrating tense' in instances like these leave us to doubt the factual validity of Billy's claims.<sup>20</sup> Whether the events take place as Billy recounts or are mere constructions of his imagination remains indeterminable to the end. Billy also crucially reveals his tendency to fictionalize when he states that after finding life meaningless post-war, '[they tried] to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help.' (*SH*, p. 82) Vonnegut thus highlights the near impossibility of extracting a conclusive account of the war experience through formal ambiguity, due to the wounded mind's instinct to repress the truth and its consequent incapacity to recall the traumatic incidence lucidly. As Caruth asserts, the tendency in trauma victims to '[filter] the original [through] the fictions of traumatic repression', makes the traumatic event available 'at best indirectly'.<sup>21</sup> The truth of the traumatic incident thus perpetually eludes Billy such that he himself cannot imagine nor reconcile the 'great big secret somewhere inside' (*SH*, p. 142).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 15-6.



Due to the repetitiveness and latency of trauma, Billy is never able to attain a sense of closure and the traumatic ‘wound’ remains open. This results in a structural circularity encapsulated in his motto ‘Farewell, hello, farewell, hello’ (*SH*, p. 117) and the interminable limerick ‘My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin [...] And so on to infinity.’ (*SH*, pp. 2-3) Allen suggests that the novel’s narrative chronology is like ‘an ascending, widening spiral that circles over the same territory yet does so from an even higher and wider perspective.’<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Vonnegut shows that the circularity of time is not only true at a personal scale but at a historical scale as well. He reads of the ‘boundless’ devastation of Dresden in 1760 that wrecked it to ‘sad ruins’ (*SH*, p. 14) in the context of having returned from a war that has left it as desolate as the ‘moon’ (*SH*, p. 147). He also highlights the unrelenting repetition of destruction throughout history. From the overthrowing of Sodom and Gomorrah thousands of years B.C. (*SH*, p. 18) to the costly Children’s Crusade (*SH*, p. 13) and the foreshadowing of the future bombing of North Vietnam (*SH*, p. 49), Vonnegut suggests that the end of an atrocity often marks the beginning of another. Moreover, he draws an implicit parallel between the cycle of history and the cycle of life and death: ‘On an average, 324,000 new babies are born into the world every day. During that same day, 10,000 persons [will] have starved to death [...] 123,000 persons will die for other reasons.’ (*SH*, p. 174) In this way, he implies that the likelihood of history repeating itself is almost as certain as the inevitability of life and death. Höbling states, Vonnegut displays an ‘almost eerie anticipatory vision’ where one can ‘no longer conceive war as an exceptional historical situation that has a cut-off

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<sup>22</sup> Allen, *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 85.

date'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Vonnegut paints a dismal and skeptical picture that the historical cycle of destruction will ever cease.

The circular structure of time also serves another key purpose: it disrupts the construction of a cause-and-effect sequence. Vonnegut's urgency to 'escape the yoke of narrative succession' can be felt when he gives away the climax and ending at the very start of the novel: 'the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby' (*SH*, p. 4) and 'it ends like this: 'Poo-tee-tweet'?' (*SH*, p. 18)<sup>24</sup> Billy's ability to make sense of a war movie though it is played backwards (*SH*, p. 61) also highlights the futility of chronological sequence. Rather, the novel examines a method whereby each occurrence is viewed in isolation, like bugs trapped in amber, such that 'there isn't any particular relationship between all the [scenes].' (*SH*, p. 72) Paradoxically, the Tralfamadorians suggest that it is only by viewing life in this disjointed way that one can make order of the occurrence of unexplainable incidents such as the atrocities of war and the arbitrariness of accidents. Vonnegut's biographer W. R. Allen affirms that the sudden death of Vonnegut's sister Alice in a train crash 'left a permanent impression on [him] of the randomness inherent in human existence.'<sup>25</sup> Indeed, accidents are a key motif recurring throughout the book. Billy, an incompetent soldier, outlives the much better prepared scout soldiers purely by chance. In addition, Billy's father is accidentally shot dead by a friend during a hunting trip while Eliot Rosewater unintentionally kills a young fireman mistaking him for the enemy. The appropriate response to these events, the Tralfamadorians suggest, is not to demand explanation or justification. Against the chanciness of the

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Hölbling, 'The Second World War, American Writing' in Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> Freese, 'Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five or, How to Storify an Atrocity', pp. 22-3.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 5.

universe, they assert, such demands would attempt to derive rationality where there is none: ‘Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? [...] There is no why.’ (*SH*, p. 63)

Following their footsteps, Billy experiences a relativizing of all the events in his life. In his mind, ‘everything is all right’ (*SH*, p. 163). At one point in the novel, Billy ‘went from total dark to total light’ (*SH*, p. 73) while another time finds him swung from the ‘violet light’ of death to the ‘red light and bubbling sounds’ of pre-birth (*SH*, p. 35) within moments of each other. His experience has a dramatic leveling effect on the ‘ups and downs’ (*SH*, p. 71) such that the dichotomy between the two extreme states seems less and less significant. In a similar vein, the phrase ‘So it goes’ is uttered to describe everything from the historic death of Jesus Christ (*SH*, p. 31) to the trivial expiry of champagne in a bottle (*SH*, p. 60). Yet while some critics take issue with the attitude of indifference Vonnegut seems to advocate, many others like Allen point out the ‘piercing wail of grief’ muffled beneath the ‘self-protective quashing of affect’.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as Dawes remarks, ‘Vonnegut and Billy’s distancing catchphrase ‘So it goes’ becomes in the last two pages the verbal equivalent of a facial tic, revealing both the emptiness of language in the face of atrocity and a deep, repressed, rageful disgust.’<sup>27</sup> To accuse Vonnegut of endorsing the Tralfamadorian brand of self-satisfied nonchalance would also ignore the critical undertones of his depiction of Billy who, in adopting a Tralfamadorian view of life, loses his ability to sympathize and feel deeply:

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<sup>26</sup> Allen, *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 95. James Dawes, ‘The American War Novel’ in Marina MacKay (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Dawes, ‘The American War Novel’, p. 61.

Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do. He was simply having lunch with the Lions Club, of which he was past president now. (*SH*, p. 49)

Billy couldn't help suspecting that there was much to know about Robert. (*SH*, p. 145)

Billy demonstrates an unnerving dearth of responsive feeling towards the impending war and even towards the concerns of his own son. Vonnegut does not show empathy for Billy's unresponsiveness – instead, he reserves his empathy for Lot's wife, who turns to gaze at her collapsing city despite its fatal consequences out of a strong emotional impulse. Vonnegut remarks, 'I love her for that, because it was so human.' (*SH*, p. 18) Indeed, Vonnegut shows that the cold indifference displayed by the Tralfamadorians could never suffice for human beings. Even Billy, for all his devices, is shown to feel intense sorrow and regret – he weeps himself to sleep and is left paralysed when confronted by the stark horror of his past during the flashback triggered by the barbershop quartet. These moments are highly evocative, and remind us that the intense emotional capacities of humans can never be fully numbed to the horrors and atrocities of war.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* ends as it promises, with the '*Poo-tee-tweet*' of the birds. In this manner, the story of Billy Pilgrim comes in full circle from its beginning, where the audience is implored to 'Listen.' The birdsong is a powerful audible symbol for the distorted, unintelligible nature of the voice of trauma, and reminds us of the futility of any attempts to fixate a definite sense of meaning to it, and by

extension, to the war. By distorting the conventional structures of narrative, Vonnegut achieves the similar ends to a poignant and powerful effect.

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