

TIME SKIPS AND TRALFAMADORIANS:
CULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA AND SCIENCE FICTION IN KURT VONNEGUT'S
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AND THE SIRENS OF TITAN

Gina Marie Gallagher

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Tom Marvin, Ph.D., Chair

Master's Thesis
Committee

Robert Rebein, Ph.D.

Karen Johnson, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Gina Marie Gallagher

TIME SKIPS AND TRALFAMADORIANS: CULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA AND SCIENCE FICTION IN KURT VONNEGUT'S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AND THE SIRENS OF TITAN

In his novels *Slaughterhouse-five* and *The Sirens of Titan*, Kurt Vonnegut explores issues of cultural identity in technologically-advanced societies post-World War II. With the rise of globalization and rapid technological advancements that occurred postwar, humans worldwide were mitigating the effects of information overload and instability in cultural identity. The influx of cultural influences that accompany a global society draws attention to the fluidity and inevitability of cultural change. A heightened awareness of cultural influences—past and present—creates anxiety for the generation living postwar and before the dawn of the Information Age. This generation suffers from “cultural schizophrenia”: a fracturing of the psyche characterized by anxiety over unstable cultural identities and agency. With the characters of Billy Pilgrim and Winston Niles Rumfoord, Vonnegut explores the different reactions to and consequences of cultural schizophrenia. His unique writing style is an effective hybrid of science fiction conventions and the complexities of human culture and society. Ultimately, Vonnegut explores the dangers of detachment and the complicated nature of agency with novels that are both innovative and accessible.

Tom Marvin, Ph.D., Chair

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Epigraphs	vi
The Clock	1
Synopsis	2
Cultural Schizophrenia and Its Origins in Toffler	7
Narrative Style	12
Use of Science Fiction Devices	19
Exoneration of Billy and Condemnation of Rumfoord	27
Conclusions	38
Works Cited	42
Curriculum Vitae	

EPIGRAPHS

In our lifetime the boundaries have burst. Today the network of social ties is so tightly woven that the consequences of contemporary events radiate instantaneously around the world. . . Indeed, not only do contemporary events radiate instantaneously—now we can be said to be feeling the impact of all past events in a new way. For the past is doubling back on us. We are caught in what might be called a “time skip.”

-Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*

“How did I get here?”

“It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber.”

-*Slaughterhouse-five*

[Bea’s] book, unfinished, is left on Titan, forgotten. The anticipated vindication of Beatrice’s hard-won philosophy of life is not realized, deliberately perhaps, because it then remains the illumination of a single person which foreshadows the great awakening to come in the next generation. That, the author seems to be saying, is enough.

-Donald L. Lawler, “*The Sirens of Titan*: Vonnegut’s Metaphysical Shaggy-Dog Story.”

THE CLOCK

In this excerpt from Charlie Reilly's 1979 "Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut," Vonnegut discusses his father's artistic legacy in an interview:

He did a number of wonderful things architecturally, but most of them are gone now. One thing left is something they call 'The Clock,' which is located at the intersections of Moravian [Meridian] and Washington streets in Indianapolis—or, the 'Crossroads of America,' as they call it. Anyhow, at that intersection there's a department store, the L.S. Ayres Department store, which my father and grandfather designed. And on that store is a clock which is an almost tradition. It's a beautiful thing to see. But Indianapolis has had the misfortune to continually prosper and, when a city enjoys that type of prosperity, it enjoys the ability to continually 'renew' itself. 'Renew' is the wrong term, of course. What the city does is architecturally destroy itself. It cannibalizes the types of graceful and delicate architecture that made it a thing of beauty. So I guess there was something harrowing for my father: existing in a city, a provincial capital like Indianapolis, witnessing the systematic replacement of works of art, many of which he helped create, with a bunch of amorphous cinder blocks.

Vonnegut describes "The Clock" designed by his father and grandfather that was built in 1905 ("L.S. Ayres Department Store," Waymarking) and remains in Indianapolis today. He expresses sympathy for his father, who lives to see his artwork being replaced by homogenized, lifeless forms of commercial culture in the mid-twentieth century. He laments the loss of historical, traditional Indianapolis but comments that this loss is a consequence of the city's prosperity. In a postwar global society, every generation is eventually steam-rolled by technological, scientific and cultural advances. In his work, Vonnegut analyzes issues of change, destruction and survival larger than his father or himself: he explores the cultural and societal disconnect faced by postwar humans in general. Culture continually reinvents itself, not with the permission of its creators but with its own life force and possessing the subjectivity of future generations.

SYNOPSIS

In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote about a phenomenon he calls “future shock” that occurs when people feel alienated by their own culture due to rapid advancements and an overwhelming awareness of global history and events. I feel that this phenomenon is particular to a specific generation and that, rather than experiencing a replacement of culture, this generation had become aware of the instability of their individual cultural identities. In this thesis, the term “cultural identity” is meant to specifically denote the psychological sense of self that humans establish in relationship to their own culture. The “cultural” aspect of “cultural identity” is a compilation of several factors: geography, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexual orientation.

For the sake of clarity, the generation of postwar humans living in technologically advanced societies of during the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s—a generation of to which Vonnegut belongs—will be referred to as the “Awareness Generation.” This term is chosen rather than “Greatest Generation” because the latter denotes an American generation while the former is meant to encompass a global identification. In the years between World War II and the Information Age (late 1970’s-present), there occurred a fundamental change in the way that humans in developed nations viewed cultural identity. Technological advancements had enabled access to a plethora of cultural exchange and the effect became an “overload” of cultural information. “Information overload” is a general term but here it is meant to describe the process felt by the Awareness Generation once technology opened up global communication and allowed the rapid exchange of cultural information. Further, the Awareness Generation became aware of the subjectivity of cultural identity—the idea that cultural identity is not

universally stable but instead is constantly reinterpreted. Realizing their inability to maintain stability in cultural identity, many in the Awareness Generation suffer a fracturing of self-perception: cultural schizophrenia.

Cultural schizophrenia is a product of the unavoidable awareness that one's cultural identity is not permanent or stable but, rather, fluid and subjective. In the rapidly changing postwar global climate, humans possessed a distinctive preoccupation with cultural agency. For the first time, humans were in the unique position to have unprecedented access to other cultural ideas and achievements beyond the borders of time and space. While the benefits of cultural exchange are significant, the global influences on individual cultures effects can be alienating for humans. Because the sources of influence are so widespread, humans can experience a lack of agency over cultural change and cultural identity.

The goal of this thesis is to draw attention to the causes and consequences of cultural schizophrenia as Vonnegut presents them in the novels *Slaughterhouse-five* and *The Sirens of Titan*. These novels are innovative in their non-linear narrative structure and the inclusion of elements of science fiction, particularly the devices of time travel, omniscience, and an alien race called the Tralfamadorians. In the contrasting characters of Billy Pilgrim and Winston Niles Rumfoord, Vonnegut explores different reactions to the effects of cultural schizophrenia.

In *Slaughterhouse-five*, Billy Pilgrim is a deer caught in the headlights of cultural schizophrenia, unwilling or unable to participate comfortably in culture. Billy is an outcast and an anti-survivalist, characteristics that expose his tendency to detach from society. Winston Niles Rumfoord, the hero/villain of *The Sirens of Titan*, is a

commanding, confident presence who is determined to play the part of global puppeteer and create a new world order. Rather than recognizing the importance of human relationships, Rumfoord sees mankind as a series of tools that will help him implement his own plan for global control. Instead of expressing sympathy for the plight of the Awareness Generation, Rumfoord capitalizes on cultural schizophrenia—even as he suffers from it—by exploiting mankind at its most vulnerable and using humans as playthings in his new super-religion. In the divergent characters of Billy Pilgrim and Winston Niles Rumfoord, Vonnegut creates different reactions to cultural schizophrenia and the motivations behind their dual introductions of new philosophical doctrines to mankind.

Billy and Rumfoord are foils for one another—Billy is passive and easily bullied while Rumfoord is self-assured and controlling—but both suffer remarkably from cultural schizophrenia. The source of their confusion is the same—the instability of cultural identity—but their symptoms are different. Billy manifests this condition through passive reluctance and a general disinterest in survival. Rumfoord cuts a dashing figure throughout most of the novel and his exploits seem surprisingly successful, but they ultimately leave him as empty and selfish as a child tyrant, unable to control his own destiny, let alone the cultural fate of Earth.

Rumfoord's excess of ego and ambition dictate that he will attempt to wrestle control through force or manipulation and his lack of empathy allows him to dismiss the value of human relationships. Billy's complete lack of ambition or assertiveness dictates that he detaches from mankind at signs of instability or unfamiliarity. Both men are eventually confronted with the disconnect between their past and present roles. Rumfoord

as an omniscient being represents the struggle of the Awareness Generation to reconcile the impermanence of cultural identity with desire to maintain agency over this identity. Billy plays multiple roles as Depression-era adolescent, wartime soldier and participant in Great Society-era America. Billy is able to eventually accept the disconnect between these roles by embracing the inevitability of the situation while Rumfoord remains torn between his roles as God figure and mortal man. With his advanced awareness, Rumfoord is trying to simultaneously improve the past and dictate the future. Like Rumfoord, the cultural awareness of postwar society gives the Awareness Generation a false sense of control over the course of global cultural events.

Vonnegut argues that it is possible to overcome the fracturing and scattering effects of cultural schizophrenia by embracing the idea of cultural identity as nonpermanent and fluid. Just as the Tralfamadorians are able to appreciate all parts of a whole at once—seeing humans as “great millipedes” with every biological evolution present—Vonnegut puts forward the idea of viewing culture not in chunks or eras but as a constant, ever-changing entity. The very different reactions to cultural schizophrenia exhibited by Billy and Rumfoord are only similar in the sense that they are both forms of detachment from mankind. Billy tries to detach through passivity and withdrawal while Rumfoord detaches by elevating himself to a demigod. Vonnegut points to Billy’s acceptance of the inevitabilities of cultural schizophrenia as an alternative to wasting the present worrying about the past and the future, while Rumfoord’s abuse of his omniscience demonstrates the futility of trying to simultaneously overshadow the past and dictate the future. Rumfoord’s life is no happier for his quest to define and stabilize culture and in fact, many lives are lost or ruined in the process. Vonnegut suggests that

Rumfoord's obsession with cultural authorship comes at too high a price and is only effective in the short-term, while Billy's contentment and acceptance recalls Nietzsche's image of a child who spends the day building a sandcastle and laughs when the tide destroys it (Nietzsche).

CULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA AND ITS ORGINS IN TOFFLER

In his 1970 book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler describes the unique psychological effect that progress has on modern culture. He calls the phenomena “future shock,” comparing it to the overwhelming experience of existing outside one’s own cultural comfort zone. “Future shock is the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future... Future shock is a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated rate of change in society. It arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one. It is a culture shock in one’s own society” (13). Unlike culture shock, sufferers of future shock are unable to “return” to their original culture because that culture has evolved into something unrecognizable. Toffler asserts that future shock is “the disease of change” and can be evaluated medically because it is, in fact, “a real sickness from which increasingly large numbers already suffer” (4). Toffler believes that the state of future shock qualifies as a psychological illness, one with potentially dangerous results.

I agree with many of Toffler’s points: early- and mid-twentieth-century humans faced an overload of cultural information and rapid societal changes. The effects are bound to be psychological and can interrupt the decision-making processes of humans because of the overwhelming amount of cultural stimuli. I disagree, however, with some of his conclusions. Toffler says that future shock “arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one.” I would argue that what these humans experience is not a superimposition of one culture with another but rather the awareness of instability in cultural identity. What alarms the Awareness Generation is not a sense of cultural “replacement” but the awareness that their culture is not isolated from the past and will

not be isolated from the future. Although once isolated by mountains, oceans and deserts, cultural evolution is now influenced by contributions from abroad. The fact that the source of cultural change is so far removed from their own control causes anxiety over a lack of agency and authorship. Furthermore, future shock is described as a “premature arrival of the future,” but I would disagree that the future is arriving prematurely for the Awareness Generation. It is not the arrival of the future that frightens them; rather, they are overwhelmed by the impulse to improve upon past culture while simultaneously dominating present and future culture.

I argue that what the Awareness Generation suffers from is the instability and subsequent fracturing of cultural identity by the realization that culture is not permanent but fluid. The Awareness Generation was the first to define their own cultural identity not in fixed terms but in relation to other cultures, past and present, and is often unable or unwilling to create continuity between them. The term “schizophrenia” is appropriate because the experience of the Awareness Generation reflects a fracturing of the cultural psyche. The Greek root of the word schizophrenia—a term coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 (“Schizophrenia,” Hopkins Medicine)—is a “splitting of the mind.” The state of cultural schizophrenia can create a similar psychological split that is based on fractured, unstable cultural identities.

It is helpful to analyze some of the contributing factors to cultural schizophrenia. To begin with, an essential change in the global psyche occurred following the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. The changes in global society were unprecedented, and the rate at which culture changed was dizzying. In the span of a lifetime, agriculture and manual labor were replaced with an industrial economy (Toffler 16). After the advent

of the Industrial Revolution, the twentieth century saw rapid advances in technology, communication and transportation. Technology grew by leaps and bounds with tools like telegraphs, telephones, radio and television. These changes were developed in rapid succession; technological innovations occurred within generations rather than over centuries.

In addition to accelerated rates of advancement, the Awareness Generation is faced with an overload of global information and increased historical memory and awareness. Unlike the generation that came before them, members of the Awareness Generation are able to observe not only their own culture's current events but also foreign events. For the first time, humans had the unique ability to access a plethora of cultural information crossing temporal and geographical boundaries. Consequently, the way in which members of the Awareness Generation view their own individual cultural identities is altered by knowledge of other cultures, living and dead. They confront permeation of culture as an inevitability of existence due to increasing access to and knowledge of other cultures. Toffler states, "Today the network of social ties is so tightly woven [that] ... not only do contemporary events radiate instantaneously [but also]... we can be said to [feel] the impact of all past events in a new way. For the past is doubling back on us." We are "caught in" what Toffler calls a "time skip" (17). Toffler is drawing attention to the fluidity of time that results from rich historical memory and awareness of global events. No longer is culture a stable, steady force because the boundaries of culture have widened exponentially. Vonnegut too imagines phenomena of "time skips," in which Billy's present triggers a "memory" of past or future in which he proceeds to participate outside of the linear structure of time. For example, while being deloused in a

prison camp in Germany, Billy “skips” backwards and forwards in time, first to his infancy, as a baby being swaddled by his mother. From there Billy skips to “playing hacker’s golf” on a “blazing summer Sunday morning” (*Slaughterhouse-five* 108). From there he skips to his time on a Tralfamadorian spacecraft, comfortably flying to an artificial habitat made especially for him. The pleasant sensation of the delousing shower on Billy’s freezing body transports him to three other memories, each reflecting the multifaceted roles and cultural identity of Billy Pilgrim.

Toffler believes humans must choose to be either puppet or master to technological evolution; he is gripped with fear that technology will shortly run rampant and feels that individuals, organizations and societies ought to be prepared for dealing with this “new force.” He asserts that people are unable to come to grips with the frightening new future that is looming. The year in which Toffler writes *Future Shock*—1970—is a culturally tumultuous time in which the dawn of the Information Age had become unavoidable. While his theory that rapid cultural advancement causes disorientation is valid, his response to the steamroller of technology is alarmist.

A good example of cultural schizophrenia in the Awareness Generation is the predicament of soldiers returning home from World War II. They have seen horrific destruction and death, but what their society calls for is that they return home to be model sons, husbands, fathers and workers. Just like Billy Pilgrim, the soldiers are asked by their societies to move on from the roles they played in war and to rapidly reinvent aspects of their cultural identity. Like Billy Pilgrim, the trauma of war gets compartmentalized along with their pre-war cultural identities in an effort to function once again as civilians. They may be functioning in their new roles, but mentally,

spiritually and emotionally, they have been fractured both by their experiences and by the change in their cultural identity. Or consider the plight of Rumfoord: once he passes through the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, he gains a wealth of knowledge that is his eternal gift and burden. Like the Awareness Generation, who lives in a postwar global society but remember life prewar, Rumfoord is not able to return to a time when he was not infundibulated. Rather than try to reevaluate his cultural identity, he compartmentalizes his experiences as a limited Earthling and takes up the roles of Commander-in-Chief and spiritual leader. Those who know Rumfoord on Mars know nothing about his life prior to his omniscience—to them, he is a larger-than-life, semi-deity who appears sporadically and gives instructions. Despite Rumfoord's efforts to conceal his past, his time on Earth prior to omniscience still exists and his memory of this time still affects his psyche and cultural identity. Rumfoord uses his new information to control his culture, just as the Awareness Generation uses expanded technological and communicative resources to control cultural change.

NARRATIVE STYLE

One of the most striking aspects of Vonnegut's narration is that he does not follow a conventionally chronological timeline. Neither *Slaughterhouse-five* nor *The Sirens of Titan* is told in a chronologically linear manner. In *Slaughterhouse-five*, Vonnegut writes in his own voice for the first chapter, explaining his journey of writing the novel. Following that, Vonnegut sums up Billy's entire life chronologically over the course of six pages. This short, chronological summary mimics the way that the Awareness Generation views cultural histories. The lifetimes of ancestors and entire civilizations are summarized for efficiency and in doing so, the Awareness Generation risks losing the cultural nuances they contain. Vonnegut spends the next 245 pages telling the story entirely out of order, complete with time travel, reminiscing and authorial interruptions. In doing so, he defies the typical beginning-middle-end formula and forgoes the use of a chronological plotline. Wayne McGinnis, author of "The Arbitrary Cycle of *Slaughterhouse-five*," asserts that this is appropriate since the novel's "real subject matter and formal arrangement is renewal, in this sense it is like the Tralfamadorian novel, a novel without beginning, middle, and end, without suspense and without a moral" (McGinnis 120). Just like culture, there is no beginning, middle or end in Vonnegut's work. There are no surprise twists or endings that neatly wrap up the events of the novel. In relinquishing the convention of chronology, Vonnegut urges readers to view his novels in a larger context. In much of traditional literature, storylines are based on the peaks and valleys of character conflicts, but "although his story was full of conflict, it really had no climax, and in the end, nothing was resolved" (Marvin 114). Vonnegut is infusing postmodernism into science fiction in an unprecedented way. There

are no simple answers to the problems faced by Vonnegut's characters because those problems run too deep and are too unavoidable to surmount entirely. These problems do not exist in isolation but rather are interactions of the human psyche with culture and society. There are no entirely happy endings because the problems of cultural schizophrenia do not disappear; rather, participants learn to live with it. Some of Vonnegut's characters, like Billy, grow and learn and some even achieve a certain amount of peace or contentment. Likewise, many of the characters, like Rumfoord, exit with more questions than answers and little or no resolution for their experiences. Vonnegut doesn't promise a happy ending; instead, he explains all the good and bad events at once and spends the rest of the novel highlighting the characters' nuanced experiences as they struggle with cultural schizophrenia.

Vonnegut's non-linear method also serves to add poignancy to the story and eliminates distance between the narrator and reader. Billy's time skips may not be a traditional lens for the world but they resemble the rupturing of cultural identity in the Awareness Generation. Stylistically, the time skips take place in present tense because "events appear on the same temporal plane and relate to the non-judgmental observations of the protagonist at specific moments in time" (Rigney 15) in which logical sequence does not dominate. The events of *Slaughterhouse-five* are told through the recollections of a narrator, adding the closeness and clarity that comes from firsthand experience. The effect is that readers are experiencing Billy's fragmenting psyche firsthand and witnessing that identity is not chronological or stable.

Significantly, the writing and narration style of Vonnegut is minimalist. As Vonnegut says himself at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-five*: "There are almost no

characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces” (208).

The “enormous forces,” in the case of culture, are the preoccupation with gaining agency over and subjectivity of cultural identity. Consider the first instance in which Billy comes unstuck in time. He begins in Germany, leaning against a tree, wishing he were dead.

When he opens his eyes, he is being thrown into the deep-end of a pool at the YMCA as an adolescent, sinking to the bottom, unable to swim. From there he travels to his middle age where he visits his dying mother who asks him “How did I get so old?” just before he reads a book about a soldier who is shot for cowardice. He then travels backward to his son’s Little League banquet and forward again to his infidelity at the company Christmas party. Attempting to drive home from the party, Billy passes out and wakes up, leaning against the tree in Germany again. This entire sequence occurs in less than five pages, with each event summarized briefly and minimally. Nevertheless, the complexity of the content and significance of the sequence order stands out against this minimalism.

Vonnegut connects Billy’s role as a soldier to his role as a son—first adolescent and then adult—and then to the passive dysfunction of his marriage and again back to Billy the soldier. The strength of Vonnegut’s simplicity is to highlight the muddled, tangled lives of his protagonists.

I would agree with Rigney that, “Vonnegut’s minimalism is a defiant one, as strong as the lines of a caricaturist” (Rigney 21). The issues that Vonnegut deals with are complex, yet he has a talent for summarizing entire time periods, concepts, or people in a few words or sentences. Vonnegut summarizes, but he does so in such a minimalist way that he calls attention to the plethora of information that is not present in a summary. The

minimalistic “elements are striking because they seem so outrageously inadequate a vehicle for dealing with the moral and political complexities being referred to” (Rigney 18-19). In their minimalism, they draw attention to the impossibility of absorbing all of the complexities of the experience of the Awareness Generation. These “complexities” are manifestations of an overload of social awareness and the unique global attitudes of the twentieth century. Rather than taking away from these complexities, Vonnegut’s minimalism allows him to articulate simple truths more effectively. This simplicity, combined with the accessibility of science fiction conventions, makes Vonnegut’s novels understandable and relatable to his audience. Vonnegut understands that in order to portray the complexities of cultural schizophrenia, it is more efficient to use the simple language and unconventional devices associated with science fiction.

While Vonnegut incorporates science fiction devices in his novels, he does not write science fiction—which is an important distinction to make. He uses particular devices and conventions without limiting himself to a single, uniform genre. Mellard argues that Vonnegut is able to “transcend the formula-ridden genre... by instilling life into its most transparent clichés, by reducing its formulas to absolute archetypes, and by elevating its trite metaphysical theme to the status of a believable eschatology” (192). By injecting a sense of legitimate reality in even the most typical science-fiction conventions, Vonnegut is able to weave a hybrid between a profound literary depth and the approachability of science fiction. For example, Vonnegut explores the complexities of friendship and isolation in *The Sirens of Titan* through the character of Boaz. Stranded in the caves of Mercury, Boaz “befriends” a race of creatures called “harmoniums,” which are essentially large, beautiful insects. The scene that Vonnegut paints is

aesthetically gratifying, as the fantastical creatures attach themselves to Boaz's heart beat and pulse and live off of his record player's vibrations. His attachment and responsibility towards the harmoniums seem both fascinating and ridiculous, like a lot of science fiction. However, woven between the celestial setting and alien creatures are poignant, heartbreaking moments of truth: "I ain't never been nothing good to people, and people never been nothing good to me... I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm" (217). Here, Vonnegut asks the readers to consider the complexities of Boaz's relationship with mankind, but he does so in a non-threatening manner, relieved by the comedy of science fiction.

Vonnegut's work is a collage of influences and excerpts and these complexities, played out in the realm of science fiction, are more accessible. Speaking on *Slaughterhouse-five*, Rigney argues:

[Vonnegut] has woven into the fabric of its text nuggets from Irving, quotations from Truman, commonplaces bearing on the German camps (that the candles given to the POWs were made from the 'fat of Jews and Gypsies' for example) echoes of popular self-help guides and psychobabble, along with recalls of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and of cheap science-fiction movies. (Rigney 13)

Vonnegut's work itself represents the continuous fluidity of culture and widespread nature of cultural influence in the wide array of sources that are tapped. His narration mimics the availability of all of these influences in the lives of the Awareness Generation; it often includes long asides and tangents about specific aspects of the human experience, drawing on all of these cultural sources as reference points. Vonnegut understands that the experience of the Awareness Generation is a schizophrenic one, with many different roles to play and an overload of information to absorb. Vonnegut's writing, in its breadth of knowledge and hybrid of genres, is an example of stream-of-

consciousness, which includes references that cross cultural boundaries of both time and space. Vonnegut's writing style is so popular with the Awareness Generation because he taps into the multiplicity of the global, twentieth-century experience. The innovation of this style of writing is not easily labeled.

Vonnegut's work seems to defy categorization because the themes central to his work are wholly modern and demand a new, original approach to narration. The sum of all of the aspects of his novels is a writing style that is scattered, punctuated and simple, but also richly complex, easy to access and bravely honest. What Vonnegut manages to do is create a marriage between the depth of traditional literature and the accessibility of science fiction. The issues he deals with are serious, complicated, and serve as a reflection of the human condition, but his methods of delivering those issues are offset by the simple, usable conventions of the science-fiction genre.

Rigney points out that Vonnegut "gets our wires crossed and holds incongruous discourses together" while still creating "that aesthetic surplus value with which Russian formalists identified 'literariness'" which she defines as "qualities displayed by a narrative that could not have been predicted and, being unique to a particular work, provide a constantly renewed reason to return to it" (Rigney 13-14). The Awareness Generation—as well as their successors— continues to return to Vonnegut's work because it allows them to explore complex ideas in an uncomplicated way. Works that are particularly unique, innovative and grabbing, are often a reflection of the times in which they are produced and Vonnegut's novels are no exception. His narrative style is a reflection of the ability to connect with contemporary readers while simultaneously exploring the depth of a global existence. Vonnegut's odd narrative style is a blend of

history, science fiction, encyclopedia facts, sketches, animal noises, science fiction, repetitive sayings, Swiftian parody and memoir. What results is something that is uniquely Vonnegut and remarkably genre-defying. Vonnegut's work is undeniably postmodern. It is largely schizophrenic and includes the element of "pastiche," placing familiar stories and styles in a new setting. His awareness of historical styles of literature parallels the enhanced historical awareness of the Awareness Generation.

USE OF SCIENCE FICTION DEVICES

Vonnegut routinely uses science fiction devices in his novels, and *Slaughterhouse-five* and *The Sirens of Titan* are heavily swathed in space travel, time travel, brain control and aliens. Marvin argues that Vonnegut chooses to incorporate science fiction elements “not for their own sake, but for the power they give him to explore the meaning and value of human life in a technological age” (43). The simplicity and accessibility of the science fiction genre allows Vonnegut to explore complicated issues in a way that relates to the experiences of readers.

The supernatural aspects of science fiction allow Vonnegut to more capably explore the intricacies of what I am calling cultural schizophrenia. In the case of Billy Pilgrim, Edelstein asserts, “Every element of Billy’s ‘sci-fi fantasy’ can be explained in real, psychological terms” (Edelstein 129). This crossover between psychology and science fiction is intentional; the realm of fantasy is the perfect canvas on which to act out the complexities of the human mind. Billy’s experience, when reduced to a chronological summary, may seem simple and ordinary, but the more layers that are added and the more scenes that are introduced, the more complicated and traumatizing the experience becomes. Science fiction is an apt vehicle to explore the complexities faced by Billy and the Awareness Generation because the seriousness of the issues is offset by the absurdity of science fiction. His stories are reminiscent of Beckett, who creates vaudeville characters playing out the meaning of life with a minimalist style: at once profound and accessible.

Vonnegut uses science fiction—which is often over-the-top or comical—as a sugar coating for bitter pills. As Rose affirms, “Some very disturbing things are said and

are said quite openly. But it is all safely displaced onto a science fiction. Comfortably surrounded by all that fiction, we can tolerate some truth” (21). Vonnegut is dealing with the fracture of cultural identity, a subject whose pain is mediated by the absurdity of science fiction. Near the end of *Slaughterhouse-five*, Vonnegut makes an important, disturbing statement that is coated in science fiction. “On Tralfamadore, says Billy Pilgrim, there isn’t much interest in Jesus Christ. The Earthling figure who is most engaging to the Tralfamadorian mind, he says, is Charles Darwin—who taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements. So it goes” (268-269). Just as the instability of mankind’s biological identity was upsetting to many of Darwin’s contemporaries, so too is the awareness of the instability of cultural identity upsetting to the Awareness Generation. Like biological evolution, instability in cultural identity is upsetting to humans because it implies that their identity does not rest solely on present conditions but also on the past and the changes of the future. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut uses the description of a space ship to sugarcoat a hard truth about the desire of humans to control their own destinies. “The only controls available to those on board were two push-buttons on the center post of the cabin—one labeled *on* and one labeled *off*. The *off* button was connected to nothing. It was installed at the insistence of Martian mental-health experts, who said that human beings were always happier with machinery they thought they could turn off” (169). Here, Vonnegut juxtaposes the dry hilarity of the *off* button situation with the truth that humans feel more secure when they have a sense of security and control over their decisions. This situation harkens to Rumfoord’s need for cultural control and more largely to the desire of the Awareness Generation to mitigate their cultural influences and control their own impact and identity. It doesn’t matter that

the *off* button doesn't work because its purpose is just to make the space soldiers more relaxed and unaware of their lack of agency. In both of these examples, Vonnegut delivers observations of the human experience that are difficult to swallow without the coating of humor.

In *Slaughterhouse-five*, Vonnegut uses the plot device of time travel to represent the fracturing effects of cultural schizophrenia. Billy Pilgrim is continually uprooted—against his will and without his permission—into different time periods in his life, across both continents and galaxies. Billy's "time skips" occur quite literally—he is transported through time and space to different occurrences in his life seemingly randomly. It is possible for Billy to be uprooted by these time skips with little warning, turning "linear time into something like a minefield, with fractures and ruptures that perfectly normal people can fall through on any ordinary day" (Sieber 148). These fractures and ruptures, as Sieber describes them, are symptoms of cultural schizophrenia. While Billy's ruptures are literal, the cracks in time for the Awareness Generation are more subtle. The awareness of other times and cultures is constantly interrupting everyday life in for this generation. For example, the Awareness Generation has the ability through technology and modern communication to trace the lives and cultures of their ancestors. While often rewarding, this process can lead to a sort of "time skip" itself, making the participant feel overwhelmed with the impact on their cultural identities. Additionally, the influences on culture are so widespread for postwar societies—in a global economy, everything from material goods to abstract influences like art and music are exchanged rapidly. The Awareness Generation are faced with the task of mitigating the tension between global influences and a sense of agency over cultural identity. The influence of cultural memory

and awareness on the behavior of current future generations is inevitable. Significantly, Billy becomes more contented after he accepts the inevitability of these influences.

Billy's time skips also allow Vonnegut a device for presenting non-linear story telling. The method of using a non-linear time structure can be hindered by realism while the science fiction of time travel can be problematic because of its unreality. While unorthodox in most novels outside of the science-fiction genre, time travel is the perfect tool in evaluating the effects of cultural schizophrenia: Billy's psyche and identity have been fractured by the drastically different roles he has played and the disconnect between different experiences. Because of his awareness that culture is rapidly changing, Billy is affected by instability in his identity and feels like an unwilling participant in his own culture. Vonnegut even terms these moments of time travel "time skips," the exact terminology used by Toffler in *Future Shock* to describe the effect of history catching up with the present.

Another way of looking at the device of time travel is as a coping mechanism for Billy to deal with the confusion and fragmentation of his identity. Lundquist argues that "Billy is anything but a thin character; he is another illustration of Vonnegut's concept of Protean man. Billy *needs* to travel back and forth in time not only to understand himself but also to endure himself, to become his history. He is many personalities, many selves existing together at once" (79-80). These "many personalities" are the result of Billy's cultural fragmentation, and he cannot establish or understand his own identity in its linear, chronological order. Time travel allows Billy to live the moments in a succession outside the normal timeline in a way that is more instructive and helpful.

The device of omniscience plays a large role in *The Sirens of Titan*. Rumfoord's experience of cultural schizophrenia is depicted by his explorations through space and his consequently altered state. After flying through an unknown intergalactic channel (called a chrono-synclastic infundibulum), Rumfoord emerges on the other side with knowledge of all events in the universe: past, present and future. He also gains the ability to be in multiple places at once, depending on when the chrono-synclastic infundibulum's spiral intersects planets. His materializations on different planets are not done by choice, but he does have the advantage of predicting when they will occur and planning accordingly. He is able to travel farther and see more than any other person, but he only exists substantially on Titan and appears as little more than a projection on other planets.

Vonnegut's fictional *A Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do* warns against entering chrono-synclastic infundibula, reporting:

You might think it would be nice to go to a chrono-synclastic infundibula and see all the different ways to be absolutely right, but it is a very dangerous thing to do. The poor man and his poor dog are scattered far and wide, not just through space, but through time, too. (9)

Similarly, the Awareness Generation is influenced by culture "through space" in the way of global awareness and "through time" by cultural memory. In a positive way, this awareness and memory allows this generation to "see all the different ways to be absolutely right" but unfortunately, it also "scatters" them and fractures their cultural identity. As a member of the Awareness Generation, Rumfoord is, quite literally, stretched thin.

His supernatural state attracts a lot of attention and, combined with his prestige on Earth, allows him to set himself up as a God-like figure. His awareness of all things and ability to be in multiple places do not enhance his relationship with humanity and human

culture but rather create a chasm between himself and mankind. Rumfoord's temporal, almost supernatural existence is a representation of the distance Rumfoord places between himself and humanity. Like Rumfoord, Billy is privy to the knowledge all events throughout his life including the future. Also like Rumfoord, Billy's extraordinary ability initially serves to further separate himself from mankind. By representing the overload of cultural awareness with intergalactic omniscience, Vonnegut is able to inject humor and accessibility into a difficult condition.

What is remarkable about the Tralfamadorians is their ability to see in far more dimensions than human beings. While Rumfoord's abilities and Billy's awareness extend beyond the standard human range, their knowledge of the universe could fit in a thimble compared to the vast point of view of the Tralfamadorians. Not only do aliens appear in both *Slaughterhouse-five* and *The Sirens of Titan*, but both novels feature the same race of alien-robots from Tralfamadore.

The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (*Slaughterhouse-five* 34)

This unique perspective "allows Tralfamadorians to see patterns and rhythms of moments that human beings cannot see about their own lives" (Sieber 151) and Billy becomes a convert to their philosophy of all-time as well. The Tralfamadorian philosophy is also applicable to the cultural change in the sense that culture does not have a beginning or end and its change is inevitable. The awareness of this inevitability, rather than frightening the Tralfamadorians, is just an opportunity for them to enjoy the high points

of their lives more vividly and gratefully. They know that they will end because they must end but they are content with what they have done while they were in the universe.

Not surprisingly, Billy uses the Tralfamadorian fantasy and the doctrine of Tralfamadorians as a coping mechanism. He is unable to cope with the fracturing of his own cultural identity and turns to science fiction—and by extension, the Tralfamadorians—as a tool for understanding and rebuilding his identity.

Chronologically prior to his time with the Tralfamadorians, while recovering in the hospital on Earth, Billy makes friends with a veteran named Eliot Rosewater who adores Kilgore Trout's science fiction novels. Like Billy, Eliot is damaged from his time in World War II. "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war... So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help." The absurdity of Trout's novels—complete with aliens, time travel and space ships—is laced with the harsh realities of the Awareness Generation.

"Another time Billy heard Rosewater say to a psychiatrist, 'I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living'" (128-29). In a way, science fiction novels are the "new lies" that help placate Rosewater just as the Tralfamadorians help Billy to understand his own condition. As Veas-Gulani points out, "Tralfamadorian philosophy, which opposes trying to make sense of occurrences, helps Billy deal with the horrible events and their consequences by reinterpreting their meaning" (180). Seen from the Tralfamadorian perspective, the trauma of Billy's experiences is reinterpreted as something that he can choose to accept and from which he can move on. Similarly, the science fiction devices that Vonnegut

utilizes in these novels help readers reinterpret their own cultural identities as a means to connect with cultural change.

EXONERATION OF BILLY AND CONDEMNATION OF RUMFOORD

For Billy, the trauma of cultural schizophrenia begins in his early childhood. Billy's mother, unsure about what religion she ought to follow, hangs a ghastly crucifix above Billy's bed, an image that haunts his adolescence. The motivation behind the purchase of the crucifix is the cultural confusion of Billy's mother. She buys the piece at a flea market in a haphazard attempt to establish a pillar of stability in her cultural identity. "Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (49). The lack of satisfaction felt by Billy's mother is characteristic of the effects of cultural schizophrenia. She harbors little or no connection to Christianity but attempts to use it as a way of grounding her own experiences in something stable and permanent. She eventually loses interest in the endeavor but Billy is left with traumatic associations with both religion and quests for cultural meaning.

Billy is hopelessly misplaced as a soldier. In the largest sense, he has no business being anywhere near an armed, violent conflict. As Chaplain's Assistant, Billy ranks lower than a private. To make matters worse, he is unpopular and unwanted by his comrades. He is not only useless to them under the best of circumstances, but once on the run, he is a parasite. One of the most vital comforts of army life—a strong sense of camaraderie and brotherhood—is entirely unavailable to Billy. In this sense, Billy is very much a member of the Awareness Generation, out of touch with his own culture and confused over his role in that culture.

As if it were not bad enough to cast Billy as an outcast among the soldiers and POWs; to add insult to injury, he looks absolutely ridiculous. Instead of the traditional garb of a soldier, Billy wears a comical toga-like garment that causes laughter even in the

middle of war. Billy is cursed with a small, weak body that most resembles a Coca-Cola bottle. His shoes don't fit and his fur-lined coat is made for a woman—literally everything about him is mismatched. “He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo” (42). Throughout the novel, readers get the impression that Billy is playing a part, like an actor—except he doesn't know any of his lines and none of the other actors want him on stage. He also wants to get off the stage and leave everyone alone but the director demands he remain there and perform. After spending time with the British POWs, Billy is outfitted in shiny boots meant to be Cinderella's slippers and a bright azure toga made from the curtains of a stage. Because he does not even resemble a functioning soldier, Billy is not able to blend in with the other POWs and his inability to play his part is obvious and distressing. This inability helps to fuel Billy's self-destructive, anti-survivalist tendencies.

In the strictest sense, Billy is not good at life—that is to say, living. As a soldier, he is described as “empty-handed, bleakly ready for death” (*Slaughterhouse-five* 41). Even before the war, Vonnegut shows us examples of Billy consciously choosing death over life: he strongly desires to stay at the bottom of the pool at the YMCA, where he is drowning, and he is resentful of being pulled out. Later, his wish to peacefully freeze to death in Germany is against every human survival instinct. Of his lack of interest in living, the narrator says: “It was absolutely necessary that cruelty be used, because Billy wanted to quit” (55). Considering his best lifetime memories, he decides that he is most comfortable while laying in a coffin-shaped wagon in Dresden. Billy seems to rebel against the basic principles of survival inherent in all animals. Some of the happiest moments of Billy's life—on Tralfamadore—occur as he is being held against his will and

treated as a zoo animal. Billy seems most contented when nearly all of his free will has been removed and he can take a break from making decisions. It is true that Billy “reacts to the horrors of the world around him by withdrawing totally from reality” and is “not merely an ostrich who hides his head in the pleasant moments of his past rather than facing the difficulties of the present and the future; but one who crawls back into the egg itself” (Edelstein 136). Because Billy has no stable identity on which to depend, he is overwhelmed to the point of vegetation and would be more comfortable as an infant or a fetus. He resents living in a time when the overload of cultural awareness make it necessary to care about so many different problems and people and feels unprepared for the task.

Nevertheless, Billy is a rare survivor of the carnage he experiences. He endures the disintegration of his unit: he alone of the four men survive their march, and he even goes on to be one of the few survivors of the Dresden bombing. Later, he is the lone survivor of a tragic airplane accident. Billy survives carnage almost in spite of himself—not through any extraordinary skills or knowledge but by dumb luck. Billy may want to remain on the bottom of the pool or the snow in Dresden just like the Awareness Generation wants to retain the illusion that cultural identity is punctual and stable. Billy is unable to reconcile the disconnect between his roles as soldier, worker bee, father, husband and son, and his reluctance to participant in life is a result of the paralyzing confusion of his awareness of all roles. If the Awareness Generation tries to combat the inevitability of cultural change with cultural stagnation, it will still be unable to halt cultural change.

Billy and Rumfoord both suffer from the effects of cultural schizophrenia, but they handle the condition in drastically different ways. Because of Billy's temporal and often embarrassingly non-linear existence, he is particularly adept at rolling with the punches. He has few survival skills, but on the upside, he garners few expectations and is rarely disappointed. As the novel goes on, Billy moves away from detachment and reaches out to his fellow man, armed not with ego and style but with simple compassion. He sees himself as a natural recipient of the trials and tribulations of the human experience. In his last weeks, he reaches out to humanity and achieves a profound level of self-actualization. While Billy cannot bypass the effects of cultural schizophrenia, he can learn to accept them and use them as a tool for connection rather than confusion. It would appear that Billy gains control over his life the more he accepts that he has no control. In the same way, cultural progression is impossible to predict because it influences so many factors. While Toffler worries about the disintegration of human culture at the hand of technology, Vonnegut suggests that allowing the demands of the future to overshadow the present is unproductive and futile. Rumfoord is ensnared in a feverish desire to write the next several centuries' worth of human history; he is absolutely determined to establish precedents that will not be quickly forgotten. He is so preoccupied by his role as global cultural architect that he loses sight of the importance of friendship and human connection. Furthermore, he is unable to grasp that culture is bigger than any one person and will continue to change without the permission of its architects.

Despite his power and supernatural abilities, Rumfoord ultimately disparages his existence as a mere tool for the Tralfamadorians. He is deeply insulted that all of the

efforts of the last several thousand years of human existence—including his own—have been nothing but an effort to relay an intergalactic message. Earth’s most significant architectural feats can be explained by the manipulation of the Tralfamadarians; these works of art, which have come to be symbols of human achievement, are explained away as nothing more than intergalactic post-it notes. The message that Salo is sent to deliver simply reads, “Greetings.” Rumfoord’s last moments are tortured by his unsuccessful desire to uncover the meaning of the message for which Earth has been manipulated. Rumfoord plays a colossal hand in shaping human events, but he is deeply insulted that a larger hand than his is also at work. He fails to recognize the futility of attempting to dominate the future.

Even at the end of his time in the Solar System, Rumfoord is still focused on the wrong things. He spends his entire life micromanaging, searching glory and power, believing that his cultural pyramids were the largest and would last the longest. Yet in his last moments, he laments that all of the great external triumphs of man were nothing more than a reflection of intergalactic manipulation. He ends his time in the universe on a petulant and powerless note. Rather than reveling in the connectedness of the universe and laughing at the absurdities of life, Rumfoord balks at the awareness that he is but another drop of water in a very deep well.

Rumfoord fails to assign meaning to the true significance of the human experience; it doesn’t matter what causes cultural achievements, it only matters how and why humans react and participate in these achievements. Rumfoord’s life is not reduced to his free will or agency in his choices, but it is instead colored by his human connections: friendship, camaraderie, love. It is in these fields that Rumfoord knows little

and this is the reason that he is afforded no peace in his final moments. Comparing how Vonnegut disposes of these two characters shows his support of Billy's momentum toward humanity and condemnation of Rumfoord's egotistical isolation, and it is the reason he allows Billy to exit life so gracefully while Rumfoord is puffed out of existence by an angry sunspot.

Additionally, the contrast in the two characters' motivations is certainly reflected in their very different fates. Both men end up starting a new doctrine of sorts, but their philosophies and incentives are drastically different. Rumfoord possesses very little empathy or sympathy for his fellow man—this is Rumfoord's worst quality and the reason Vonnegut damns him to an eternity of intergalactic loneliness. Billy does the best he can to appease the various people in his life but suffers from countless obstacles against which he is often ill prepared. His intentions are never malicious but his psyche is stretched rather thin by the temporality of his existence. Billy's motives are not noble but they are neither malevolent nor selfish: he merely assumes that he is not able to deal with the circumstances of his existence.

As a child, Rumfoord put together a room under the stairs of his ancestral mansion that was christened "Skip's Museum": a collection of "mortal remains" and "souls long gone" in the form of "shells, coral bone, cartilage, and chiton." The crown jewel of the museum is, frighteningly, a "complete skeleton of an adult human male" (19). The room—still intact in Rumfoord's adulthood and the location which he chooses for his meeting with Malachi—is representative of the way that Rumfoord sees all living things, humanity included. The men and women that make up the Army of Mars are not unlike the shells and bones that adorn Skip's Museum. The members have had their

memories cleaned out and are programmed to be obedient by a mechanism installed in their brains, leaving them little better than hollow, empty shells of human beings. “The concessionaires knew all too well about Rumfoord’s penchant for realism. When Rumfoord staged a passion play, he used nothing but real people in real hells” (243). Rumfoord’s motives are not noble but selfish; he wants prosperity not for humanity but to glorify his own role as a leader of men.

Leslie Fiedler cleverly points out, “Winston Niles Rumfoord... both author and guru, as articulate and omnipotent as Prospero on his Island... seemingly wants to rule the world but turns out only to have longed to create a religion” (13-14). The religion founded by Rumfoord, “The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent,” is just an extension of Rumfoord’s distance from and disinterest in human beings. The Church motivates its members not through love or compassion but through the morale building of a counterattack on the Martians followed by the extreme guilt of having carried out the Martian massacre. He sacrifices the Martian Army so the Earthlings can have martyrs and saints and sends Malachi and his family to Titan, bearing the guilt of all humanity. He encourages his followers to again look outward for their sense of purpose and moral order, leaving them highly vulnerable to brainwashing and his own manipulation. Bear in mind that this is not a lowly prophet in a modest hut but rather a blue-blooded, ego-driven American adventurer who resides in a replica of the Taj Mahal and installs antennae in the brains of those whom he wishes to control. In his role as spiritual leader, Rumfoord appears as little better than a Medicine Show peddler, performing for his adoring crowds like a televangelist in a circus tent.

Rumfoord's spiritual superficiality is foreshadowed in the novel by Noel Constant, a filthy recluse who makes millions by correctly predicting the fluctuations of the stock market. Noel's method of acquiring stocks is based on the letters that make up the first sentences of an English version of the Holy Bible. The story of genesis is a shared story, one that is revisited by all major religions of the Western world, but Noel's sole interest in it is to break it down, letter by letter, in order to make money. Significantly, Noel is an uneducated hermit living in a shoebox of a hotel room while Rumfoord is not only cultured and well-educated but supernaturally endowed as well. While their lens of the world is drastically different, Rumfoord ends the novel no better than Noel Constant begins it.

In his own twisted way, Rumfoord wants to create an all-purpose global religious culture that will contribute to mankind. In his excitement to form a new world order, he becomes absolutely preoccupied with leaving his mark on the operation. He fails to achieve his role as "the omniscient architect of the golden age" and instead "is unceremoniously kicked out of the universe on a mission to nowhere, still wondering about the purpose of it all" (Lawler 78-9). Rumfoord seeks comfort in distance—he makes himself a god, exercising his will over his perceived natural inferiors. He carries an air of superiority with such confidence that all other men seem to naturally defer to him as a leader. This recognition allows him to establish an identity as a cultural icon, one that will be indefinitely remembered—thus simultaneously topping his predecessors and laying strict ground rules for future development.

In spreading a new doctrine, Billy's intentions are far removed from Rumfoord's; Billy simply wishes to help people out as much as he can by helping them drown out the

bad times and tune into the good. “The cockles of Billy’s heart, at any rate, were glowing coals. What made them so hot was Billy’s belief that he was going to comfort so many people with the truth about time” (*Slaughterhouse-five* 35). Billy’s motivations lie in his desire to bring comfort to mankind by sharing the truth—or, at least, what Billy believes to be the truth—with anyone willing to listen. In this way, Billy is able to contribute, even minutely, to the Awareness Generation and mankind more generally. While the Tralfamadorian philosophy is by no means perfect, Billy’s goal of easing the discomfort of his brethren is a noble one. Significantly, in Billy’s pseudo-religion, he does not ask anyone else to step in as a martyr. Instead, Billy willingly takes on the role of a Christ figure, even telling his loyal fans that he will be killed and that it is part of something larger than himself. This self-sacrifice is the polar opposite of Rumfoord, who creates martyrs in the thousands by force but will not place his own head on the block.

Billy Pilgrim is often pointed to as a Christ figure, and the label is not inaccurate. He is a passive, wandering “pilgrim” who announces his own murder moments before it occurs. Vonnegut makes numerous allusions—Billy stands “crucified” on the cattle car, he holds his own “last supper” in which he accurately announces his imminent murder and asks his fans not to be sad. Like Christ, Billy attempts to introduce a new doctrine to mankind, not by force, but by spreading the message with love and kindness. Sieber points out that Billy is even “reborn” after his time on Tralfamadore.

At the beginning of the novel, Billy certainly possesses a “diminished responsiveness to the world around him” (Vees-Gulani 179). It isn’t just the horrors of Dresden from which Billy seeks escape, the fantasy also stems “from the moral responsibility of having to do something about war, his meaningless existence, the

generation gap, ghetto riots, cripples who work magazine rackets, and so on” (Edelstein 133). The effects of information overload have burdened his senses and his conscience. He cannot deal head-on with the central issues in his own life because he is so preoccupied by the upheaval and instability of life in the Awareness Generation.

Billy wants to escape the overload of information and awareness that he drags with him as a burden. He is not content to remain in reality because his psyche has been fractured as a victim of cultural schizophrenia. Ever passive, Billy is unable to deal with the changes and difficulties that he encounters and chooses to tune out. “So it goes” is also a mantra of detachment, a tool exercised when life is too difficult to dwell upon. The constant refrain of “So it goes” is his ultimate philosophy and perhaps Vonnegut’s as well. It is a statement without judgment—whether the event in question is good, bad or indifferent, it exists and will exist. The statement further acknowledges that the universe does not halt, however large a tragedy or joy occurs in humanity. Billy does not achieve any sort of self-worth or stable identity until he is humbled into accepting both good and bad experiences as a symptom of human connection. Just as there is no cure for Billy’s helplessness, there is no cure for cultural schizophrenia because the Awareness Generation accepts cultural change more slowly than it occurs. The answer is not to cut oneself off from society but rather to use cultural schizophrenia as a tool to connect with mankind and appreciate the beauty of mankind’s constant cycles of creation and destruction.

Vonnegut criticizes the decisions and attitude of Rumfoord and makes clear that his detachment and obsession with glory stem from ego rather than fear. Rumfoord has the capability to know more and travel farther than any other human—these unique

abilities further fuel his attempts to distance himself from mankind. By building himself up as a God, imbued with his supernatural omniscience, Rumfoord creates a chasm between himself and mankind that grants him style and power but no real peace of mind. The most poignant lesson to be taken from *The Sirens of Titan* is summed up by Beatrice on Titan in her old age:

“The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody,” she said, “would be to not be used for anything by anybody.”
The thought relaxed her. She lay down upon Rumfoord’s old contour chair, looked up at the appallingly beautiful rings of Saturn—at Rumfoord’s Rainbow. “Thank you for using me,” she said to Constant, “even though I didn’t want to be used by anybody.”
“You’re welcome,” said Constant. (317)

What Malachi and Beatrice learn at the end of their lives is that the most important action to be undertaken by humans is to love other humans. The worst possible way to live would be in complete disconnect, never using or being used by anybody else. Likewise, the most beautiful moments of *Slaughterhouse-five* are the occasional reminiscences of kindness and brotherhood: the sharing of food on the cattle car, the hospitality of the English POWs towards the Americans, and, heartbreakingly, the German soldiers in Dresden—now little more than a band of Lost Boys—emerging to see their city burned to the ground in mere hours. Hardship is bearable, Vonnegut seems to be saying, heartbreak is bearable—so long as there will always be pairs and trios and groups of human beings to suffer and love and complain together.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-five*, Vonnegut says his father once pointed out there were no villains in any of his stories, to which Vonnegut replies, “That was one of the things I learned in college after the war” (*Slaughterhouse-five* 10). In the wake of the first half of the twentieth century, Vonnegut is confident that there is no such thing as absolute good or absolute evil. The settings of his novels are reflective of Vonnegut’s own world, where moral ambiguity runs rampant and good intentions often manifest themselves in horror. The truths he is dealing with are complicated and sometimes difficult to bear.

The complexity of Vonnegut’s universe, and the horror which his characters experience, is juxtaposed with a minimalistic writing style and unconventional narration. The novels do not appear linearly or chronologically but in skips, destruction and rebirth. Vonnegut cleverly intertwines his stories with science fiction conventions as a way to both mitigate the difficulty of his topics and explore the issues on a larger, more innovative canvas.

He uses time travel not only to eliminate the need for linear story telling but also to illuminate Billy’s fragmentation of life stages and the varied roles he is asked to play over the course of his lifetime. His identity is fractured and unstable and his time travel also serves as a way of revisiting his trauma and seeing the good moments interspersed with the bad. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut uses omniscience as a metaphor for the unlimited boundaries of information and communication in twentieth century. Rumfoord’s journey through the chrono-synclastic infundibulum imbues him with supernatural omniscience and the ability to appear in multiple locations at once. His

appearances, however, are less substantial than a normal existence, and his information overload, rather than teaching him humility or humanity, further fuels his ego and ambition. Vonnegut uses this device to show the “scattering” effect that an overload of information has on cultural identity and the way in which the Awareness Generation uses this expanded knowledge to detach themselves from mankind.

The Tralfamadorians, an alien race of robots that appear in both novels, also serve as tools for discussing cultural schizophrenia. Their ability to see in multiple dimensions contrasts with the human impulse to see linearly. Billy uses the Tralfamadorian doctrine as a coping mechanism for living with cultural schizophrenia. Spreading the doctrine gives Billy a sense of purpose, making him feel as though “he was doing nothing less... than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (36). This task helps Billy overcome his fear of cultural change by allowing him to assist his fellow Earthlings in adjusting to the inevitabilities of time and change. The doctrine says that time is a living, breathing thing that exists all at once and not just punctually. “Punctual” is a significant term for Vonnegut, one that is revisited in many of his works. “To be punctual means to exist at a point, mean[s] that as well as to arrive somewhere on time” (*The Sirens of Titan* 7). In Vonnegut’s universe of intergalactic travel, time “skips,” and supernatural space aliens, “punctual” is a term that implies a limited view and the ability to remember the past but not to foresee the future. The punctuality of humans makes it difficult for them to view culture as something larger than a single generation or even era. Vonnegut points out that culture is not punctual because it is living and continues to live—never replaced but rather, reinvented. Vonnegut suggests that rather than panicking at the awareness of

cultural change, the Awareness Generation should feel a connective bond with past and future that enhances the present.

A prevailing message of *Slaughterhouse-five* is to enjoy the good moments in life and accept the bad ones. Billy understands that death and destruction are inevitable and he is not alarmed by the knowledge of when and where he will die. Instead, Billy wants to share with the world, before he leaves it, the most important lessons he has learned: the doctrine of the Tralfamadorians. Billy is no longer embarrassed by the past or paralyzed by the future because he has made a contribution to mankind, however small, and his doctrine could live on past his own life.

The Clock of Indianapolis, a thing that is “an almost tradition,” cannot exist without drawing attention to its former glory and the cultural change of Indianapolis. Its existence no longer represents progress but history; it has come to be a symbol of a rapidly dying art form rather than the growth of art and architecture. The cultural significance of The Clock has changed and this change signals that culture is not permanent or stable but always moving and changing. This change doesn’t take away from its significance and it doesn’t replace the role the Clock once served. The Clock is not an end product, but rather a culmination of everything it has seen, from the limestone quarries from which it was wrenched to its current view overlooking a Starbucks: it’s all there. The Clock will continue to contribute to Indianapolis for as long as it exists and once it is gone, it will be a piece of American culture that is lives on through its influence rather than its physical existence. Consider Vonnegut’s description of Tralfamadorian literature:

Each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We 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, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (*Slaughterhouse-five* 111-12)

Like cultural identity, Tralfamadorian novels are meaningful when all parts are viewed at once. No single aspect of cultural identity exists in isolation because culture is constantly changing and encompasses everything that came before it. Like a Tralfamadorian novel, the significance of cultural identity does not lie in one a moment but rather the connections that run throughout.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Gina Marie Gallagher

Education:

Bachelor of Arts, English, Indiana University

Bachelor of Arts, Political Science, Indiana University

Master of Arts, English, Indiana University