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Listen: A Close Reading of Vonnegut

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Modern World Fiction

Listen: A Close Reading of Vonnegut

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

(Slaughterhouse-Five, pg 23)

Kurt Vonnegut has long been respected as a master of the written word. In this passage, he uses a specific tense, repetition, and clause arrangement to portray the simultaneous calm and chaos of the life of the main character, Billy Pilgrim, and his experiences while shifting through time.

The first word of the selection holds a lot of power. Vonnegut starts the selection with a command followed by a colon- "Listen:". In this way, he not only garners the reader's attention, but indicates that whatever comes next is part of the same, important thought. By spacing the lines such that the first word stands alone, the reader's eyes are immediately drawn to it. "Listen," says Vonnegut, and you want to.

The word "unstuck" seems to imply something positive here, as if Billy Pilgrim coming unstuck in time was a great event, a reversing of something negative, as if he has escaped from the bonds of time as not many have the chance to do. Also important is the tense; the word "has" makes this sentence written in the present perfect tense. By

definition, present perfect tense refers to an action that happened at an indefinite time or one that happened at more than one time, including those that are occurring in the present. In this case, it is the coming unstuck that took place in the past but is still repeating today. By using this tense, Vonnegut has already told you what, exactly, it means to “come unstuck”; Billy’s actions have lost their place in the line of time

The passage here continues on with “Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day,” in which Vonnegut not only moves towards explaining the disorder, but also tells the reader a great deal about Billy Pilgrim’s life. Within fourteen short words, the reader begins to understand that the timeline of life is no matter to Billy, as well as learning that at some point in his life, he was married and since then, his wife has died and he has gone senile.

Word choice aside, the repetition of words and ideas is what makes the next part of this selection interesting. The three sentences all begin with “he has,” which is another example of present perfect tense and again implies that these things have no definite timeline. The repetition of the pair of words also present an imitation of the way in which Billy Pilgrim can repeat portions of his life. “Awakened on his wedding day,” “to find himself in 1963,” and “random visits,” all imply that he has very little control over his condition, but that it does indeed happen frequently.

The last sentence also includes a subtle indicator of character. What is important is the way that the phrase “he says” is tucked between two longer, very important clauses, so that the reader almost misses it; and yet, it may have more of an impact than either of said clauses. Vonnegut has already stated that Pilgrim goes senile at some point, but up until now, the reader has no reason not to trust Pilgrim’s outrageous claim. However, as

soon as the author hints at his own doubt of Pilgrim, Billy as a character seems a little less believable.

By the end of the passage, the reader is unsure whether “Listen” was a command or a plea, but Vonnegut has gotten their attention nonetheless. By repeating phrases and using a tense that allows each action to become indefinite, he creates a sense of shifting through the reading the way his main character claims to be able to cycle through life.

(605)