

The Metaphysics of Time and Psyche in
Slaughterhouse-five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August

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Preface

Time, as both a lived experience and a literary construct, has long fascinated writers and thinkers alike, offering a lens through which to explore memory, identity, trauma, and the human condition. In contemporary fiction, especially speculative and science fiction, time is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic force that shapes the lives and choices of characters in profound ways. This project centers around two seminal works: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, both of which use time travel as a narrative mechanism to interrogate the psychological and existential dilemmas of their protagonists.

The project is organized into four chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction", provides a foundational framework for understanding the thematic complexity of time and its psychological implications. The second chapter, entitled "Structured Manipulation of Time", explores the structural role of time in both novels. It highlights how Vonnegut and North manipulate chronology to reflect fragmented human experiences, memory distortions, and philosophical meditations on fate, free will, and recurrence. The second chapter, "Psychological Realism in the Lives of Billy Pilgrim and Harry August", delves into the mental dilemmas and existential crises that emerge as a result of involuntary or cyclic time travel. The concluding chapter offers a synthesis of the findings, reflecting on the broader implications of time-centered narratives in understanding the human psyche. It reaffirms the relevance of literary time travel not merely as a fantastical device but as a profound metaphor for psychological trauma, moral responsibility, and existential reflection.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence. Time is not only understood in a purely textual dimension, but also as the reader's mental construct. Temporal aspects play a crucial role in both reception-oriented theories and cognitive theories of narrativity. The study of time in narration was pioneered by Russian formalists and composition theorists, as well as in German morphological approaches. In general, these approaches assume that there is a chronological order in a 'story' from which the arrangement of events in a narrated text deviates. Time is not just a measure of hours, days, or years; in literature, time becomes a living structure, a thread that holds the narrative together or pulls it apart. As human beings, our perception of time is linear. We grow, remember, forget, and expect. Yet some novels challenge this flow and introduce us to worlds where time loops back on itself, stutters, or collapses. Two such novels are *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North. Both deal with time not merely as a setting or device but as the very medium through which human experience is explored and questioned. In these texts, time is distorted to reveal trauma, identity, and metaphysical speculation. Through their distinct approaches to temporal narrative, Kurt Vonnegut and Claire North challenge the reader's understanding of history, memory, and personal agency.

In literature, Time encompasses various narratives that employ it for different purposes and with different results. Some writers use it to explore the

future and see how the doubts and fears of the present day inform the possible futures their heroes visit. Furthermore, many authors explore the past in an attempt to observe it and learn from it. Others go to the past in an attempt to change it, whether it is a historical event or a moment from their personal history. Those attempts are usually unsuccessful and act as a warning that the past should not be interfered with. But science fiction authors are not the only ones who dabble with time travel. Scientists, philosophers, and others often debate the theoretical possibility of time travel, but also all the problems that arise from it, whether they are scientific, moral, or logical. One of the most recognizable elements of time travel is the numerous temporal paradoxes that arise from traveling through time. Rather than them becoming a hindrance, authors have used them to their advantage to craft intricate and elaborate narratives.

Many influential authors like H. G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Robert A. Heinlein have written stories that have become classics and have added to the mythology of time travel. Time-travel as a literary device is used for various purposes. Many uses of time-travel can be connected to the postmodern literature strategies accounted for earlier. “One of the ways in which time-travel is used is as a way of playing with the concepts of time and causality” (Wittenberg 28). “Additionally, it is used to challenge the distinction made between story and discourse used in narratological analysis” (Pratt 67). A simplistic description of the concepts of story and discourse would be that the story is the content of the novel and the discourse its form. Wittenberg states that time-travel fiction complicates this view, since “the 'classical' mechanisms of temporal discontinuity, dilation, or reordering are now introduced directly

into the story itself, in the guise of literary devices or mechanisms” (Wittenberg 6). In other words, in time-travel fiction, the content (story) of the work of fiction cannot be separated from the form (discourse). For example, the novels *Slaughterhouse Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* explore how the protagonists experience time loops, and the authors have written the novels with the use of the literary device of time loops. The time loop in these novels is both part of the story and the structure of the narration.

Time travel suggests the possibility of moving people or places across both geographical locations and historical periods (Jenkins 2007). Based on this idea, someone from the twenty-first century could potentially be transported into the twenty-second. Vonnegut supported such physical theories and incorporated them into his novels, drawing on his belief in scientific advancement (212). He explored the idea of displacement, shifting individuals across time and space and embedded this deeply into his conception of time travel. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he offers scientific reflections on this phenomenon. Similarly, Claire North presents a distinct vision of time in *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*. Her protagonist experiences time cyclically, being reborn at the same time and place after death, but with full memory of past lives. This challenges the linear understanding of time and instead suggests a cyclical model where the past, present, and future can be altered. Harry August, described through the imagery of a *kalachakra* or ouroboros, is not physically but temporally displaced. North uses this concept to explore philosophical and scientific questions around time, memory, and causality. Like Vonnegut, she relies on speculative structures to present time as both a physical and psychological phenomenon.

Narrative time, in its most elemental sense, refers to how time is organized, manipulated, and presented in a literary work. It becomes a tool for authors to bend, stretch, and compress the experience of storytelling. Gérard Genette's concepts of Anachrony, including Analepsis (flashback) and Prolepsis (flashforward), offer a language to dissect how time is disordered in narrative. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* thrives on these disruptions. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist, is famously "unstuck in time" which means he lives his life out of sequence, transported unpredictably between past, future, and even extraterrestrial spaces. In contrast, Claire North's Harry August is bound to a different kind of temporal deviance. He lives multiple lives, each rebirth resetting him to the same origin point. This brings to focus the concept of circular time, a looped existence where causality can be revised with foreknowledge. Here, the French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity becomes relevant. Ricoeur argues that time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and vice versa. Both protagonists experience crises of identity because the traditional linkage between memory, identity, and time is fragmented. Another pertinent theoretical lens is Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, or the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. In both novels, space and time become inseparable: the Tralfamadorian zoo and WWII Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the multiple versions of England and global history in *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*. These chronotopes do not just set the stage but define the philosophical undercurrents of each narrative.

Slaughterhouse-Five, published in 1969, is inseparable from its postmodernist roots and the historical trauma of World War II. The firebombing

of Dresden, which Vonnegut himself survived as a POW, is not just an event but a point of temporal collapse. The novel reflects the disillusionment with historical narrative and linear time that was growing during the Vietnam era. It questions the ability of traditional narratives to adequately represent trauma. By contrast, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* published in 2014 emerges from a 21st-century consciousness; one shaped by quantum theories, climate anxiety, digital identity, and moral relativism. It belongs to the tradition of speculative fiction but straddles the line between science fiction and philosophical fiction. North's novel does not offer a war trauma as its central event but rather plays with the idea of history as a malleable timeline. Here, agency becomes paramount. Harry can act upon knowledge from previous lives, and history becomes a sandbox for ethical choices.

Genre-wise, *Slaughterhouse-Five* combines war fiction, science fiction, satire, and metafiction. It resists classification. Similarly, *Harry August* merges speculative fiction with thriller elements and metaphysical musings. Both novels draw from their genre's expectations only to subvert them. Vonnegut uses science fiction to critique war. North uses time travel not to dazzle with tech. Both protagonists, Billy Pilgrim and Harry August, embody the psychological weight of nonlinear temporality. In Billy's case, the repeated experience of war and violence without closure suggests a kind of existential paralysis. In Harry's case, the repetition of lives leads to moral dilemmas that test the coherence of his identity. As Harry reflects, "*History is only the pattern of silken robes over the iron armour of circumstance*", he acknowledges the tension between agency and determinism. Through these temporal experiments, both novels demonstrate that the manipulation of narrative time is not merely a stylistic

device but a profound means of exploring the shifting terrain of human identity, memory, and the passage of experience. Time, in these works, becomes both the architect and the antagonist of the self.

Narrative studies often rely on Newton's fixed model of time, which may not suit the complexity of pre- and postmodern fiction. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity challenged this fixed notion, presenting time as flexible and influenced by speed and gravity. This led to the idea of the block universe, or eternalism, where all points in time exist simultaneously within a four-dimensional continuum. In this view, no moment is inherently past or future; all moments coexist equally. Expanding on this, the theory of Closed Time-like Curves (CTCs) proposes that time can loop back on itself, making it theoretically possible to revisit earlier events. Philosophers have also contributed to these ideas. Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence suggests time repeats endlessly, while Bertrand Russell argues that time is a psychological illusion, with our sense of flow merely our consciousness navigating a fixed reality. These combined scientific and philosophical views provide a strong foundation for interpreting *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North. Both novels portray time in ways that move beyond traditional linearity, illustrating ideas rooted in relativity and eternalism.

Science fiction is diverse. It deals with various subjects and themes. This is due to the fact that it exposes the development of science and its influence on the human imagination. Such imagination extends out the limits of the planet Earth. It travels out to the extra limitation of the human existence

even in the whole galaxies. Yet, it has another significant indication. It tries to convey the authorial concern with the probability of the human potential. Science fiction, therefore, is a genre dealing with intricate issues including the politics and dystopian subjects. Critics emphasize satire as mode of science fiction. Satire functions as a way of conveying the author's implied objection of a political fact. Accordingly, authors use satiric tones to unravel the defects of a certain political parties. As such, science fiction comprises several devices which render a literary work specific science fiction peculiarity. Time travel is an obtrusive example of the most conspicuous science fictional devices. Time travel is used by the author to express his or her views concerning a specific problem. The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a dystopian novel. It will analyse its satiric tones that employ time travel as a fictional amendment of dystopia problems.

Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* redefines traditional time travel by embedding it within the human experience. Instead of using machines or portals, the novel introduces the concept of "kalachakras"; people who are reborn into the same life with memories of their past lives intact. This cyclical experience of time allows the protagonist, Harry, to explore the long-term consequences of knowledge and memory, presenting a sophisticated thought experiment rooted in speculative science. Through the secretive Cronus Club, whose members share this condition, the novel examines how individuals might influence history, ethics, and technological progress when freed from the linear constraints of time. The emergence of an existential threat in the form of a fellow kalachakra accelerating technological evolution poses moral questions

typical of science fiction: how much should one interfere with the natural timeline, and at what cost?

Blending soft science fiction with philosophical inquiry, the novel invites readers to consider the emotional toll of living multiple lives, the weight of memory, and the nature of identity over time. North's narrative structure, which shifts fluidly across different lives and timelines, reflects the non-linear perception of its protagonist, aligning it *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Yet, Harry August sets itself apart by focusing more deeply on the consequences of temporal power and the idea of responsibility in the face of recurring life. It stands as a compelling entry in contemporary sci-fi by using a speculative premise to probe human resilience, moral ambiguity, and the very structure of time. Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* delve deep into the nature of time, identity, and existence, offering more than just science fiction adventures, they become metaphysical explorations of what it means to be human when time is no longer linear. These novels pose questions typically reserved for philosophy; What is the self if it spans multiple lifetimes or realities? Is life predetermined? Can we ever escape the cycles of our own suffering? Using speculative frameworks, both authors push their readers beyond conventional understandings of time and into a space where metaphysical inquiry becomes central.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the protagonist Billy Pilgrim becomes “unstuck in time”, a phrase that captures not only the disordered chronology of his life but also his alienation from the very structure of human experience. Billy moves between past, present, and future, never truly anchored in any moment. This detachment reflects Vonnegut's larger critique of war and trauma; by

removing the continuity of time, Billy also loses agency. The metaphysical underpinning of the novel emerges through the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians, who view all moments as permanent and simultaneous. Their famous phrase, “So it goes”, repeated after every mention of death, reduces life and mortality to passive facts, neither to be mourned nor resisted. Here, the metaphysical view is one of determinism, where every event simply is, and human resistance or reflection is rendered meaningless. Vonnegut uses this bleak framework to expose the absurdity of war and the futility of trying to impose rational meaning onto suffering. In contrast, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* explores similar temporal dislocation, but with a more interactive and self-aware protagonist. Harry, a “kalachakra”, who is reborn into the same life continuously, retaining memories from all his past lives. Unlike Billy, Harry is not a passive witness to time, he actively shapes it. Yet, this power brings with it a heavy metaphysical weight. What is the meaning of a life that can be replayed endlessly? Does choice have real value if one can always return to the beginning? Through Harry’s experiences, Claire North questions the notion of linear progress, instead presenting life as a loop where personal growth and moral responsibility become more complex over time. The Cronus Club, a secret society of other kalachakras, is both a refuge and a prison, offering shared knowledge but also enforcing strict rules about interference. This brings in metaphysical ethics - is it right to change the future if one knows what lies ahead?

One of the most intriguing metaphysical questions in North’s novel arises through the character of Vincent, another kalachakra who seeks to accelerate technological development across lives in order to achieve godlike

control over time. The battle between Vincent and Harry is not just physical but philosophical. North's narrative complicates the idea of free will, suggesting that even with endless lives, humans remain bound by desire, ambition, and fear. Each life Harry lives brings not clarity, but more emotional and ethical confusion, a stark reminder that knowing more does not always make one wiser.

Both novels ultimately suggest that the nature of time shapes human identity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, time is a trap - a chaotic, inescapable loop where Billy is reduced to a passive being, echoing the metaphysical outlook of fatalism. In contrast, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* uses time as a tool for reflection and action, but not without existential cost. Harry's many lives allow him to reshape events, but they also alienate him from the simplicity of living in the present. Both characters grapple with the burden of knowing too much; Billy through the fractured horror of war, Harry through the endless repetition of life. In both cases, the metaphysical core is rooted in the relationship between time, memory, and meaning. What binds the two books together is their shared resistance to neat conclusions. Neither Vonnegut nor North offers a simple answer to the big questions they raise. Instead, they invite readers to sit with uncertainty; to question whether meaning is created or discovered, whether time is a gift or a curse, and whether the soul can ever truly rest in a world where time does not flow as we expect it to. Through science fiction, they open the door to metaphysical reflection, reminding us that the mysteries of time and consciousness are not just for philosophies - but for all of us who live, suffer, remember, and hope.

Pastiche; defined as a playful imitation of styles or genres, operates strongly in both novels, especially in their blending of science fiction with

philosophical reflection, historical fiction, and satire. Vonnegut's style in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a patchwork of war memoir, sci-fi absurdity, and black comedy. The narrative borrows the tone of pulp science fiction when discussing Tralfamadore, but abruptly shifts to a documentary-like seriousness when describing Dresden. Claire North also constructs her narrative as a pastiche, mixing elements of spy thriller, speculative fiction, and philosophical fiction. In both texts, pastiche also extends to the structure of time itself. Vonnegut's disjointed narrative mimics the randomness of memory, as if written by someone flipping through a half-burnt scrapbook. North's looping chapters echo the rhythm of mythological tales - particularly the ouroboros, or serpent that eats its own tail, blending modern storytelling with ancient cyclical motifs. The use of pastiche becomes a reflection of how time itself is remembered, fragmented, and retold across generations.

Vonnegut, writing in the aftermath of World War II and amidst the tensions of the Cold War, uses Billy Pilgrim's time-traveling experience to criticize the dehumanizing effects of war and industrial modernity. Through the non-linear, fragmented time structure, *Slaughterhouse-Five* reflects a world where meaning is hard to pin down and reality is disjointed, a direct commentary on the psychological consequences of mass violence and modern warfare. Billy's passive drifting through moments of his life illustrates the existential numbness that characterizes the post-war generation. The phrase "so it goes", repeated after every mention of death, encapsulates a society desensitized to suffering. In this sense, time becomes a mirror reflecting the absurdity and emotional detachment of a world saturated by destruction, where history loops without progress.

In *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, Claire North brings the discussion of contemporary society into the realm of the 20th and 21st centuries, where knowledge, power, and scientific advancement take centre stage. The cyclical existence of Harry August enables him to witness the repetition of historical mistakes, the acceleration of technological developments, and the subtle shifts in political landscapes. Through Harry's interactions with other "kalachakras" and the secretive Cronus Club, North presents a layered critique of how modern society handles power, innovation, and moral responsibility. The book reflects fears rooted in contemporary culture, climate crisis, nuclear threats, unchecked science, and authoritarian regimes; but from the unique perspective of someone who lives through time repeatedly and can see the broader consequences.

In traversing the complex temporal landscapes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, we are not merely witnessing two stories of time travel, we are entering deeply philosophical meditations on memory, morality, and meaning. Through an intricate weave of intertextual references, from Eliot's poetic fatalism to existential absurdity, from war literature to philosophical science fiction, both novels redefine the function of time as a literary device. Billy Pilgrim and Harry August, the protagonists of these narratives, stand as symbolic opposites in their approach to time and agency. Billy, passive and fragmented, drifts through a war-scarred life "unstuck in time", embodying a fatalistic surrender to trauma. His story, framed by Vonnegut's metafictional and often unreliable narrative voice, resists coherence as a form of protest against war's irrationality. Harry, by contrast, is an active temporal agent whose repeated lives afford him opportunities not only for

personal introspection but for ethical intervention. North's choice of a reflective, first-person narration empowers Harry to shape, question, and ultimately fight for the moral integrity of the timeline, revealing a more structured and intellectually assertive approach to temporality.

Despite their differing narrative tones - one disillusioned, the other analytical; both characters use time to expose the fragility of truth and identity. They are shaped not just by what they endure, but by how they remember, narrate, and interpret those experiences. The novels refuse easy answers; Vonnegut critiques the senseless repetition of violence through a scattered narrative, while North warns of the dangers of unchecked knowledge and the moral burdens of history through cyclical precision. Through these characters, time becomes both a prison and a canvas. Ultimately, both authors use time not as a gimmick but as a philosophical tool to dissect the human condition across history, memory, and multiple lives. Thus, this project proposes that Billy Pilgrim and Harry August are not merely characters experiencing time travel, but literary constructs that challenge and redefine how fiction can explore trauma, agency, and the ethics of memory in an age where time is no longer linear but endlessly recursive.

Chapter 2

Structured Manipulation of Time

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, time travel means to travel through time into the past or the future. This is a hypothetical, important, and popular concept used in science fiction. This concept is seen as a way to challenge human destiny, i.e., time travel is used in fiction or movies to prevent a loved one's death or to change the course of history. The concept of travel has been explored in various books, movies, and TV shows for different reasons. David Lewis, an American Philosopher, describes the basic concept of time travel as "a discrepancy between time and time," an asymmetrical relationship between the time that the traveller experiences and the time that passes in the surrounding world; the time traveller's departure and arrival are "separated by two unequal amounts of time".

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has attempted to express his ideology on the concept of time through his books such as *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). In a 1970 New York Times interview, he states that "nothing in this world is ever final, no one ever ends—we keep on bouncing back and forth in time, we go on and on ad infinitum." In *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, Claire North introduces a cyclical perception of time that invites readers to consider the potential for human growth even with seemingly fixed circumstance. The ability of the protagonist to remember and re-evaluate past choices across lifetime gives rise to a moral and philosophical depth. In a world that appears indifferent or deterministic, the capacity for internal change offers a quiet but profound form of optimism. Through Harry's eyes, North suggests that time is not a trap but a teacher and if we are willing to listen, it may allow

us to become better, wiser, and more compassionate versions of ourselves. Unlike traditional notions of time travel, where the past or future is visited like a destination, North's portrayal is deeply interior and existential.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a novel by Kurt Vonnegut about World War II who observes, senses, and travels through time with Billy Pilgrim's eyes. Vonnegut's protagonist Billy Pilgrim was born in 1922 in Ilium, New York and studied to be an optometrist before being drafted to the Second World War. With the help of the concept of time travel, Vonnegut depicts the destruction and hollowness of the Second World War which annihilated Dresden, a German city, which had been inhabited by only civilians. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator writes,

“Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a sensible 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 deaths many times . . .” (P 19).

These lines indicate Billy's journey through time. The entire novel reflects Billy's time travel between his experience as a prisoner of war and family life in 1950s and 1960s on the earth and his time on the utopian planet Tralfamadore. While he was working with the infantry in Europe during the war, he was taken prisoner by the Germans and taken to an old slaughterhouse. Vonnegut uses time travel as his narrative technique to make his fiction postmodern and experimental. He shows his time travel,

“Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessary fun. He is in a constant state

of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (P 19).

In the semiautobiographical prologue, the author recounts his own experience of the passage of time by reflecting on his days as a World War II soldier. This places the story of Billy Pilgrim as, among other things, a meditative piece on time. The reader understands Vonnegut’s perspective through the fragmentary structure of the narrative. In the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut utilizes the real world as a background for his book “*All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true*” (P 1). World War II and its barbaric acts contributed to his personal belief that the destruction of Dresden was not a final act, and, by extension, that death does not represent a final act for all men. It is this very meaninglessness, futility, and barbarity that Vonnegut wants to either purge from his memory or create a symbol to rationalize. Moving toward the end of the chapter, he discredits the punctual time:

“Time would not pass. somebody was playing with the clocks...the second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again...There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (P 26).

According to Stephen Hawking, “In the theory of relativity, there is no unique absolute time, but instead each individual has his measure of time that depends on where he is and how he is moving”. Vonnegut seems to have exploited such a concept of time to show Billy’s time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The arrangement of time and space is extremely complicated in

Slaughterhouse-Five. The narrative time constantly switches from the past to the present; the narrative space shifts from the earth to the planet Tralfamadore. He created a fire-new narrative mode, making a combination of reality and imagination, and synchrony and diachrony. The art of fragments could be apparently perceived through the whole novel. Firstly, the tangled narrative time is a distinguishing feature of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the beginning, Vonnegut made it clear that “*Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*” (P 12). The concept of “unstuck in time” refers that Billy has become free. Consequently, Vonnegut's narrative, as well as, Billy, has achieved a freedom of sorts. The narrator will not be restricted by the conventional form of time; now, he can place Billy in any time frame he chooses. Therefore, Vonnegut gives Billy the ability to travel by time to Dresden, for example, to give us the accurate picture about the wartime experience. Vonnegut “mixedly loaded” Billy's life during a long period from 1922 to 1976. Fragmental slice of life constantly switched between the war life and after war life without control. All in all, Vonnegut attempted to reveal war's cruelty through the disordered time.

Apart from the chaotic time, tangled space is also deviant from traditional narration. The chaotic space also offered an opportunity to make a contrast between life on earth and life on Tralfamadore where “*there is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects*” (P 88) far away from earth about 446,120,000,000,000 miles, reflecting a distinct death concept. As Vonnegut mentioned,

“The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies, he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral.

All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist” (P 13).

Vonnegut created an imaginary planet, Tralfamadore, so that Billy could make his pungent complaints about war and death on the planet Tralfamadore. Vonnegut created the ideal planet to express his attitude toward death and hatred of war indirectly.

From the opening pages, we find that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a personal exploration by Vonnegut into his own experience of the passage of time. In the first, metafictional chapter, he talks about visiting his old war friend, Bernard V. O’Hare. To express how he feels about time slipping away, he quotes the Latin poet Horace, “*Eheu fugaces, labuntur anni,*” which means “Ah, time has gone by in vain.” This feeling is also shown through the character of Billy Pilgrim. For example, Billy realizes how old he’s become just by looking at a car’s license plate and wonders, “*Where have all the years gone?*” (P 57). This shows that Vonnegut uses Billy to express his own feelings about time. Earlier in the story, Billy also asks himself about the present moment: “*how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep*” (P 18). Vonnegut ponders the width and depth of the present time because he feels that the present extends backward into the past and forward into the future.

Before returning to Dresden, Vonnegut spends a night in Boston, where he describes himself as becoming “*a nonperson in the Boston fog*” (P 20). After Lufthansa puts him in a limousine and sends him to “*a motel for a non-night*”, he feels that:

“The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up

kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said and calendars” (P 20).

Slaughterhouse-Five presents a deeply deterministic worldview, one that is especially evident in the novel’s depiction of time through the perspective of the Tralfamadorians. As the epigraph of the novel already indicates, “*this is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from*”. The narrative technique is derived from the Tralfamadorian view of time. Vonnegut’s narrative strategy of the story reveals why he creates a hypothetical planet. The extraterrestrial beings deny the existence of free will, positioning it as a uniquely human illusion. The Tralfamadorians, who have got the power to watch in fourth dimensions, have already caught sight of their existences. We know that time is fourth dimension and time in the novel is extraterrestrial time.

Although the Tralfamadorians can heed each moment of their lives, they cannot remodel or change the time of their fates. It may indicate that they are predestined or believe in predestination or that time is structured. We also experience that time-traveler Billy Pilgrim also knows his future that when, how, and where he will die. The outsider race gives him lessons about time in relation to destiny, divine will, and the ultimate reality of the universe. There is a scene in which Wildhack tells Billy that “*They’re playing with the clocks again*” (208), referring to the Tralfamadorians’ manipulation of the electric clocks in the dome where Billy and Wildhack are held prisoners. In one of Billy Pilgrim’s encounters with a Tralfamadorian, the creature remarks,

“I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (P 109).

This statement encapsulates the Tralfamadorian belief that all moments in time are fixed and immutable. To them, human attempts to alter the present or strive for agency are as futile as trying to escape being trapped like “*bugs in amber*”, a metaphor they use to describe beings stuck in specific moments, unable to move beyond them.

Through Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut places time in various dimensions. Billy understands his time discontinuously, and he haphazardly apprehends his childhood, boyhood, adulthood, and death. We see in the novel that there is no chronology or sequence of time before and after the war. The themes central to the narrative are portrayed through the fragmented experiences of Billy Pilgrim. Early in the novel, Billy offers a striking comment that reflects his detached relationship with time.

“Sooner or later I go to bed and my wife asks me what time it is. She always has to know the time. Sometimes I do not know and I say, ‘Search me’” (P 6).

This simple yet profound exchange highlights how Billy, and by extension the novel, treats time not as a rigid measurement but as something fluid, even irrelevant.

Vonnegut uses this moment to emphasize a broader philosophical stance: that in a world plagued by chaos, violence, and disillusionment, portrayed in the post-war society, time loses its traditional meaning. The horror of the Second World War renders conventional ideas of time and truth almost

absurd. In a landscape shaped by mass destruction and moral collapse, asking what time it is or trying to organize life around a schedule seems trivial and futile. Through Billy's indifferent response, Vonnegut is not just commenting about one man's disconnection from daily routines; he is pointing to a wider sense of existential dislocation that characterizes the postmodern age. In this world, shaped by the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, linear time, rational progress, and even the notion of a single, coherent truth are all brought into question. Vonnegut's portrayal suggests that after such catastrophic events, trying to find stability or logic in time becomes nearly impossible. People no longer live in sync with clocks or calendars; instead, they exist in a mental space fractured by trauma, where the past, present, and future bleed into each other.

Billy Pilgrim's unique ability to move non-linearly through time fundamentally alters his perception of human experience, particularly in contrast to those who remain confined to a strictly linear understanding of history. The entire novel reflects the deconstruction of not only the plot but also of the mechanical or chronometrical time. Billy is not aware of the clock time. So, he does not belong to any particular age, but he keeps on time-traveling, shifting from one frame of time into another. Through his temporal dislocation, Billy gains access to an expanded view of life that encompasses diverse episodes from the horrors of the Dresden bombing during World War II and his time spent on the alien planet Tralfamadore, to the quieter, domestic aspects of his existence as a husband, father, and optometrist.

“And Billy zoomed back in the time of his infancy. He was a baby who had just been bathed by his mother... And then Billy

was a middle-aged optometrist again, playing hacker's golf this time- on a blazing summer Sunday morning" (P 69).

His loss of memory in the planet Tralfamadore, as "*Where am I? 'said Billy Pilgrim*, reflects absurdity and deconstruction of clock time. His time travel shows his circular concept of birth-life-death and again birth. After his death due to a shooting by Paul Lazzaro's hired assassin in 1976, he again swings back to life at the point in 1945, which indicates the deconstruction of the classical clock time theory. This disjointed chronology results in Billy's perception of time as an ever-present continuum. He comes to embrace the Tralfamadorian philosophy, which asserts that "*all moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist*" and that the human belief in sequential time is merely an illusion.

Vonnegut utilizes this narrative framework to explore what philosopher Henri Bergson referred to as "pure duration," a sense of internal, subjective time that transcends physical temporality. Billy frequently enters this inner realm when certain triggers memories, sensory details, or emotional associations. A particularly poignant example is his comparison of two seemingly unrelated scenes: one of sleeping prisoners during wartime, and another of himself and his wife lying together. Both are described using the same tender image "*nestled like spoons*" (P 70–72). Such moments are not merely recollections but act as portals, drawing Billy into a space beyond linear cause and effect, where emotional and temporal boundaries dissolve. In this way, Vonnegut not only critiques the conventional structures of time but also offers an introspective model of consciousness shaped by memory, trauma, and timeless perception.

Time travel novels pose an interesting question: If you knew everything about time, space, history, and the future, what is the only suitable philosophy to adopt? In time travel fiction, characters are cursed with knowledge. They witness events they wouldn't have in their own time. In *Stories of Your Life*, a short tale by Ted Chiang, the protagonist visualizes her life ahead of her, including tragedy. Will she accept her future? The best time-travel fiction understands humanity's struggle with the past and future. More often, that conflict reflects the individual's turmoil with the present. Our present insecurities, fears, and desires always existed in some form, and can never truly go away.

The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August is a novel by Catherine Web, written under the pen name Claire North. The novel deliberately resists the linearity we are accustomed to in fiction and life. It's not just a story of reincarnation; it is a profound meditation on time, memory, and moral responsibility. Told through the voice of Harry August, a Kalachakra / Ouroboran who is reborn into the same life over and over with full memory of previous incarnations, the novel challenges the reader to reconsider conventional notions of time as linear and irreversible. The word Ouroboran was also used to describe those who live, die, and are reborn to relive their lives again. This comes from the word "Ouroboros," which is the serpent eating its tail, which represents the never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. North offers a narrative that is circular, recursive, and ethically complex, mirroring the structure of her protagonist's existence. The manipulation of time is not merely thematic; it shapes the form, tone, and ethics of the novel. From the very beginning, readers are made aware that Harry's experience of time defies

conventional logic. He dies, is reborn, and begins to relive the same life again, complete with the knowledge of all previous lives. As he says early in the novel,

“The second time that I was born, I tried to tell my mother as much. She smacked me about the head until I shut up” (P 3).

This line is humorous yet tragic, establishing both the impossibility of linear logic in his life and the alienation that such temporal irregularity causes. The narrative begins not with his birth or youth but with fragmented memories and disjointed timelines, immediately disorienting the reader. North mirrors Harry’s perception: memory and time are no longer sequential but exist as a web of events across multiple lifetimes.

Claire North opens *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* with a disarmingly simple but profound statement: “*The second cataclysm began in my eleventh life, in the year 1996, a Tuesday*”. From the very first line, time is presented not as a passive backdrop, but as an active and recurring reality. The novel’s temporal structure is central to its narrative and philosophical depth. In the early pages of the novel, time is not measured by clocks or calendars but by the rhythm of remembering and reliving. As Harry realizes during his second and third lives,

“This has happened before. When I was born for the third time, I understood: death is no release. Death is just a beginning, again” (P 9)

The author presents a recursive structure that reflects both Eastern philosophies of rebirth and Western metaphysical inquiries into determinism and free will. Claire North treats time not as a tool for adventure, as in many science fiction narratives, but as a medium for moral inquiry. From

the beginning, Harry's awareness of his cyclical existence forces him to grapple with ethical questions: If one knows the future, is one morally obligated to change it? What is the cost of interfering? These are not scientific questions, but human ones, and the early structure of the novel reflects this interior conflict. When compared with North's other novels such as *Touch* and *The Sudden Appearance of Hope*, the perspective on time is less interested in physics but more in psychology, identity, and consequence. The beginning of *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* invites the reader to experience time as a loop rather than a line, as memory rather than chronology, and as a moral question rather than a scientific one. Claire North's vision of time is consistently human, ethical, and introspective, turning the concept of time travel into a meditation on how we live, what we remember, and what we owe to the future.

Determinism, the philosophical position that all events, including human actions, are causally determined by prior conditions, presents a significant challenge to the concept of free will. According to determinism, every event is predetermined and has only one possible outcome. When considering time travel within the framework of determinism, complex questions arise regarding causality and the determinants of actions. If an individual were to travel back in time and interact with their past self, it raises the question of whether those actions were already predetermined. The deterministic perspective suggests that such interactions were always part of the preordained timeline, implying that even the time traveler's choices were predetermined. Through Harry's repetitive lives and accumulated memories, the novel interrogates whether human beings have any true agency or if they are merely enacting prewritten scripts.

The deterministic structure of Harry August's life is established early, as he is "*born again. Looping round the same life, destined to live it again and again*". This cyclical rebirth reflects a universe ruled by fixed patterns rather than freedom. Even his attempts at escape only reset him to the beginning, reinforcing the inescapable loop. His encounters with the Cronus Club and Vincent Rankis illustrate determinism on broader scales, as Vincent's efforts to reshape the future only distort time further: "*the future was bleeding back into the past*" (P 212). Ironically, their rebellion also reinforces the same deterministic flow, as Harry notes, "*We are not gods, only men—men condemned to repeat ourselves*" (P 218). Vincent, despite believing he is breaking free, follows a path shaped by his trauma. Harry's triumph comes not through power but through memory and cumulative learning, and he concedes that "*no choice was ever made in a vacuum. We are slaves to who we were before*" (P 375). His victory thus aligns more with navigating the system than overcoming it.

The structure of the novel actively resists linear progression. Scenes are not ordered by age or date, but by emotional and philosophical resonance. For instance, a memory from Harry's third life may be followed by a reflection from his ninth. This non-sequential unfolding requires the reader to assemble meaning through association rather than timeline. As Harry himself notes,

"Life is linear for most people...For us, it's not. It's cyclical, recursive, layered like sedimentary rock. We live and re-live, not forward but outward" (P 115).

This statement is central not only to understanding the plot but to engaging with the form of the novel itself. The past and future collapse into the

present for Harry; his experience of time is reflective of the structure of the novel. North deepens the philosophical undertones of this structure through the inclusion of memory as a double-edged sword. While the ability to retain knowledge across lives grants Harry immense power, it also burdens him. He remembers every failure, every moment of grief, and every moral lapse. As he puts it, *"Memory is a curse as much as a gift. The weight of it presses against me, always"* (P 147). Structurally, this is represented by the layering of memories, echoing across chapters like recurring motifs in a musical composition. A decision made in Life Five may influence an action in Life Ten, creating a ripple effect that transcends traditional cause and effect. Time in the novel is less a river than a tide: returning, receding, reshaping the landscape each time.

The butterfly effect is a concept from chaos theory suggesting that small initial conditions changes can lead to significantly different outcomes in complex systems over time. It is often used metaphorically to explain how seemingly insignificant actions or events can have far-reaching and unexpected consequences. From an early age, Harry realizes that even well-intended actions can lead to unforeseen consequences. As he begins altering small details in each life, he reflects, *"Even the smallest stone makes waves when dropped into a pool"* (P 37). This ripple effect is magnified among the Ouroborans, who possess temporal foresight. The Cronus Club, a secretive society of these individuals, seeks to maintain ethical boundaries, yet manipulation remains possible.

When Harry discovers that Vincent Rankis is exploiting knowledge from future lives to create a quantum mirror and shift reality, the narrative

moves from philosophical speculation into thriller territory. Vincent's actions cause time itself to deteriorate, as "*sooner with every life*" (P 209) the world nears its end. His technological interventions, including knowledge of nuclear physics and computers, lead to an accelerated and distorted timeline. Alarmed, Harry notes, "*Events were unravelling, faster each time, and our world was coming undone*" (P 213). The ripple effect here is destructive, threatening not just one life, but the stability of time itself. Vincent's actions trigger a paradox; by pulling the future forward, he causes it to collapse. The "unravelling" Harry speaks of shows that the timeline is not infinitely elastic. Like a thread pulled too tight, it can snap. "*The world is ending. It always ends. But this time, it's happening faster than before*" (P 46). Harry's mission to stop Vincent spans several lifetimes, underscoring that time, though fractured, still carries forward meaning and consequence. The novel raises a powerful question: if time is malleable in the hands of those who can loop through it, does it remain sacred? Vincent believes in progress at all costs, while Harry gradually understands that interference leads to chaos. The notion of fragile time becomes clearer as Harry witnesses inconsistencies, paradoxes, and premature scientific revolutions that threaten the stability of the world itself.

In a world where time is repeatable and life is a loop, ethical dilemmas become intense. What does morality mean when one can redo a life repeatedly? Is there any true consequence to action? North embeds these questions in Harry's journey. After several lives where he experiments with selfishness, detachment, suicide, or total withdrawal, he begins to realize "*We are not gods. We are echoes. And echoes can still shape mountains if they are loud enough*". (P 280) The use of time, then, becomes a matter of conscience. Unlike Vincent,

Harry begins to act responsibly, trying to maintain the integrity of the timeline. His ultimate mission to stop Vincent emerges from the realization that time must be protected, not manipulated. It is a poetic irony, Harry, who once believed time gave him freedom, uses time to create a trap.

In both *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North, time functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active philosophical element. These novels dislocate time from its traditional linear model, opening new dimensions for examining trauma, identity, ethics, and memory. While Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* anchors time in trauma and fatalism, North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* uses time loops to explore moral responsibility and personal growth. Although both novels employ speculative frameworks, their treatment of time diverges significantly. In Vonnegut's narrative, Billy Pilgrim becomes "unstuck in time," reliving events from his life in a disordered, seemingly purposeless sequence. "*Billy was simultaneously on foot in Germany in 1944 and riding his Cadillac in 1967*" (P 2), a moment that exemplifies Vonnegut's vision of time as unreliable and meaningless, especially under the weight of war. In contrast, North presents a more structured, albeit paradoxical, vision where Harry August relives each life with complete memory. His timeline loops from 1919 to his death, allowing for variation and consequence. As North puts it, "*Chronology is a lie we tell ourselves to impose structure where there is none*" (P 6). In her portrayal, time becomes both "deterministic and malleable," with Harry's internal decisions altering outcomes, offering a morally accountable contrast to Vonnegut's fatalistic perspective.

Both authors tailor their narrative technique to echo their conceptualizations of time. Vonnegut's storytelling is non-linear, fragmented, and postmodern. Events are narrated out of order; chapters jump across timelines without transition. The author himself intervenes in the text, stating "*All this happened, more or less*". This metafictional approach collapses narrative boundaries and mimics the disorder of Billy's mind and the chaos of war. The unreliable timeline destabilizes the reader's expectation of causality, echoing the idea that life and, particularly, war, resist orderly comprehension. North, however, utilizes a layered first-person narrative that blends reflection with action. Harry tells his story as someone who has lived for centuries in repeating cycles. He often interrupts the present to insert crucial memories, echoing how memory reshapes the perception of time. For instance

"Time doesn't run; it turns. Each life spins around a core of self, and every step circles back to what we are" (P 10).

This reflective narration lends a philosophical weight to the storytelling. Unlike Vonnegut's chaotic timeline, North uses recursive structure to examine how repetition influences growth, ethics, and identity.

Both novels touch on war, but from different angles. *In Slaughterhouse-Five*, war is shown as absurd, impersonal, and inescapable. Billy Pilgrim does not fight, resist, or grow; he merely observes, unmoored from agency or emotion. Dresden becomes a metaphor for how time and violence are intertwined in cyclical trauma. In contrast, Harry August lives through multiple political regimes, wars, and disasters across the 20th century. He reflects on how manipulating knowledge can distort time's natural progression. A poignant moment occurs when he sees the result of tampering "*The world had not*

accelerated into progress. It had staggered, bruised, into chaos" (P 29). This gives time a moral terrain, a landscape shaped by the intentions of those who use or abuse it. Unlike Vonnegut's helpless observer, North's protagonist becomes a custodian of history.

Ultimately, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* present opposing philosophies of time. Vonnegut, shaped by World War II and modernist disillusionment, sees time as a cruel loop of static inevitability. His fragmented narrative mirrors the psychological fracturing of trauma. In contrast, North's postmodern world is cyclical but dynamic - time offers learning, evolution, and moral growth, even if it cannot be escaped. Time in Vonnegut's world imprisons; in North's, it educates. The former views time as an indifferent cosmic joke, the latter as a challenge of responsibility and restraint. Through different narrative forms and philosophical lenses, both novels push readers to reconsider what time means not just as a measure of existence, but as a mirror of how we choose to live it.

Chapter 3

Psychological Realism in the Lives of Billy Pilgrim and Harry August

“Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”- Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*

Having recognized the limitations of rationalist thought in confronting an absurd and chaotic world, writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Claire North turn to fantasy not merely as a form of escapism, but as a profound literary strategy to explore alternative ways of perceiving and understanding reality. When logic and linearity fail to provide coherence or meaning, both authors rely on imagination, speculative structures, and indirect perception to construct new forms of existential inquiry. Both Vonnegut and North use temporal dislocation as a narrative and philosophical device to confront existential disquiet. They suggest that when the linear rationalism of human life collapses under the weight of war, trauma, or the uncanny, it is the imaginative and the speculative that allow for deeper, if unsettling, insight. Their works ultimately blur the lines between reality and fantasy, not to confuse, but to illuminate the profound instability of meaning in a chaotic world.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut blends fantasy with ironic humour to reflect on core philosophical questions about human existence and the illusory stability of time. His protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, becomes “unstuck in time,” experiencing his life in a non-linear sequence. This fragmentation of time destabilizes his sense of identity and selfhood, as human beings typically ground their personal narratives in a chronological continuum of past, present, and future. By severing Billy’s ties to temporal order, Vonnegut exposes how

disorienting and fragile one becomes when deprived of the framework that lends structure and meaning to life. Similarly, in *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, Claire North constructs a fantastical premise in which the protagonist is born repeatedly into the same life, retaining the memories of all his previous existences. While this cyclic temporality might appear to offer the comfort of predictability, it instead complicates notions of selfhood and meaning. Like Billy, Harry is burdened with a consciousness that surpasses the ordinary human experience of time, and this expanded awareness becomes both a gift and a torment. His identity is shaped not by a single narrative arc but by the accumulation and repetition of multiple, often conflicting lives. The fantasy element here is not a retreat from reality, but a reimagining of it, a lens through which to investigate what happens when the conventional parameters of time and memory are removed or reconfigured.

A meaningless universe and the existence of the individual in that universe form a major part of the novels by Kurt Vonnegut. He combines fiction and reality, history and fantasy, pain and humour. The suffering of Vonnegut's fictional world is both existential and physical. At the root of existential thought is a search for the meaning of existence, evidenced in Vonnegut's work through his often-repeated question, "What are people for?" The author examines man's search for purpose despite the nagging doubt that a purpose will ever be found. He explores existentialism by arguing that absurdism represents the world more accurately than rationalism. All the protagonists in Vonnegut's novels exist in an environment that is basically without meaning. The ultimate statement of this meaninglessness is manifested in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the novel, traumatic events illustrate that the world is neither fair nor ordered. Characters' lives are

dictated by events far beyond their understanding. The Bombing of Dresden demonstrates a lack of innate justice. One can find the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, struggling to find meaning in the chaotic meaninglessness around him. But what it leads to is an existential crisis. He is tragically compelled to create meaning for himself in a world that lacks any manifest grace, order, or purpose.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy Pilgrim's mental illness is intricately woven into the novel's nonlinear narrative and surreal events. Traumatized by the horrific experiences of war and the bombing of Dresden, Billy exhibits signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociation, and possible schizophrenia. His frequent episodes of time travel and his belief in alien abduction by the Tralfamadorians suggest a psychological retreat from reality, reflecting his fractured sense of self and distorted perception of time. This Tralfamadorian philosophy is what helped him to believe in his imagination and gave Billy Pilgrim comfort and a source of inspiration to keep going, because through such beliefs, he can explain his irrational thoughts and visions, which are seen by his daughter and others as craziness. As a result, Billy's adoption of this philosophy instilled in him a sense of calm and acceptance, so much so that he felt compelled to share its insights with others, particularly the notion that linear time is an illusion, and that individuals might, in a metaphorical or psychological sense, revisit moments of joy rather than dwell on suffering. This worldview also reshaped his understanding of death, aligning with the Tralfamadorian belief that death is merely one moment among many. A reflection of this mindset is found in the Serenity Prayer, which he prominently displayed in his office as a source of guidance and resilience. Believed to have provided comfort not only to Billy but also to his patients, the prayer reads:

GOD GRANT ME
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
COURAGE
TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS
TO TELL THE
DIFFERENCE (95).

He was left with deep emotional scars that continue to haunt him. He was suffering from nightmares and flashbacks of his time as a prisoner of war, which left him feeling detached and disconnected from reality. In 1948, Billy Pilgrim sought help for his emotional distress at a veterans' hospital near Lake Placid, where he underwent a mix of treatments, including group therapy, morphine injections, and electroshock therapy. These methods, however, offered him little relief. Despite medical intervention, Billy continued to suffer from intense flashbacks, nightmares, and uncontrollable episodes of what he perceives as time travel. While under the influence of morphine, he even dreams of being a giraffe, chewing on a tough pear that resists him, an image that subtly mirrors his psychological struggle. Eventually, even the doctors concede that Billy is "*going crazy*" (P 47), highlighting the depth of his mental collapse.

While at the veterans' hospital, Billy met fellow patient Eliot Rosewater, who, sharing similar emotional struggles, introduced him to the science fiction works of Kilgore Trout, which explored fourth-dimensional existence and offered a critical perspective on the harshness of life on Earth.

Billy Pilgrim developed a profound attachment to the science fiction writings of Kilgore Trout, finding in them a sense of solace and psychological refuge. Influenced by Trout's narratives, he began to construct an alternate reality in which he was abducted by extraterrestrial beings who embraced a nonlinear perception of time and promoted acceptance of the inevitable while cherishing life's fleeting moments. This alien philosophy offered Billy a coping mechanism for the deep psychological wounds inflicted by war. As Vonnegut notes, "*Kilgore Trout became Billy's favourite living author; and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read*" (P 48), emphasizing the genre's significance in Billy's life. For both Billy and Eliot Rosewater, science fiction became a lens through which they could reinterpret their traumatic pasts, offering a form of existential relief and a symbolic escape from the brutality of their wartime experiences. Their shared engagement with speculative literature served not just as distraction, but as a therapeutic tool for reconstructing a worldview shattered by violence and despair.

In Freud's view, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, childhood trauma refers to the traumatic experiences that children undergo as a result of war, train accidents, and other dangerous situations that threaten their lives (Freud 241). Such experiences have a profound impact on an individual's life, affecting their behaviour and personality in ways they may not even realize. Additionally, these traumatic events may lead to the development of defence mechanisms that help individuals cope with the memories of past insults or humiliations they find difficult to forget (P 64). Billy Pilgrim's psychological and emotional well-being appears to be deeply shaped by the formative experiences of his early life, particularly those involving his father. The

relationship between Billy and his father is marked by emotional distance and fear, rather than nurturing care. One of the most striking episodes from Billy's childhood is when his father attempts to teach him how to swim by abruptly throwing him into the deep end of a YMCA pool. Billy perceives this experience not as a lesson, but as a traumatic ordeal, likening it to an execution. He recalls being carried numbly from the shower to the water, an image that evokes a sense of helplessness and detachment. Such an incident is far removed from a healthy father-son interaction and may have been a significant source of long-term anxiety or fear of drowning. This early trauma suggests a deeper psychological impact, indicating that Billy's emotional development was shaped, in part, by moments of fear and vulnerability rather than comfort and support.

The novel's portrayal of the Dresden bombing, which led to the tragic deaths of tens of thousands of people, emphasizes the terrifying impacts of war on both people and society. Billy was profoundly affected by the destruction he witnessed as a result of the attack. His waves of time travel were significantly influenced by this incident. During the war, Billy begins to travel through time, with terrible situations often triggering this journey. He continued to suffer from these events even after the war. Following his return from the war, Billy Pilgrim faces a profound sense of disconnection and struggles to find meaning or purpose in his life. Despite receiving medical care, including hospitalization, he remains unable to recover from the deep psychological trauma inflicted by the bombing of Dresden and the persistent exposure to violence. A significant aspect of this trauma stems from the verbal and physical abuse he endured during the war, particularly from fellow soldiers and prisoners of war. One of the most prominent figures in this abuse is Roland Weary, who frequently insults

and physically mistreats Billy. From their escape during the Battle of the Bulge to their eventual capture and imprisonment in Dresden, Weary subjects Billy to continuous threats and hostility.

Weary laid the spikes along Billy's cheek, roweled the cheek with savagely affectionate restraint. How'd you-like to be hit with this-hm? Hmmmm? He wanted to know. I wouldn't, said Billy. Know why the blade's triangular? No. Makes a wound that won't close up, Oh. Makes a three-sided hole in a guy. You stick an ordinary knife in a guy-makes a slit. Right? A slit closes right up. Right?. Right. Shit. What do you know? What the hell they teach you in college? I wasn't there very long, said Billy, Joe College, said Weary scathingly. Billy shrugged, There's more to life than what you read in books. said Weary. You'll find that out (P 18).

Billy is often subjected to violence and insults from Roland Weary, who forces him to look at his trench knife and threatens him. This is just one of many violent experiences that Billy has faced, and he has had a fascination with torture and gruesome wounds since childhood. Weary constantly blames and belittles Billy, making him feel more isolated and powerless. To make matters worse, he later took part in an aircraft tragedy and then his wife died from carbon monoxide poisoning. All these events can only be considered as triggers of PTSD. In chapter 2 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when Pilgrim is drunk at a party in 1961, he snaps himself back to World War Two:

Now somebody was shaking Billy awake. Billy still felt drunk, was still angered by the stolen steering wheel. He was back in World War Two again, behind the German lines. The person who

was shaking him was Roland Weary. Weary had gathered the front of Billy's field jacket into his hands. He banged Billy against a tree, then pulled him away from it, flung him in the direction he was supposed to take under his own power.

Billy stopped, shook his head. "You go on, he said.

"What?"

"You guys go on without me. I'm all right."

"You're what?"

"I'm O. K." (P 47-48)

These flashbacks are so vividly experienced by Billy that they trigger him to react as if he was actually acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring. Billy Pilgrim's 71 attempts to lead a regular life after the war and his subsequent breakdown are a significant part of his character's development in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim's ability to time travel becomes more intense as he deals with the effects of his traumatic experiences. He cannot control when or where he goes, but he often travels back to the war in Germany and the planet of Tralfamadore.

The absurdity of the human condition is embodied in Billy as he flits meaninglessly throughout the fabric of time. Like Winston Niles Rumfoord of *The Sirens of Titan*, Billy lives everywhere but dwells nowhere, and is totally overwhelmed by the trauma of history and the incomprehensibility of fate. Billy is condemned to the perpetual reliving of his trauma, what Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* identifies as "the greatest weight". Throughout the novel, Billy Pilgrim continually reflects on the tension between lightness and weight in his existence.

At one point, he envisions himself transforming into steam and rising among the treetops, a recurring fantasy that expresses his desire for transcendence and detachment. He frequently imagines himself as fluid stands in stark contrast to the image of a fallen American soldier, described as a lifeless “stone”. Billy longs to rise above the relentless flow of history, to escape the deterministic forces of accident and fate. Yet, he remains tragically fixed as a “*bug trapped in amber*”, immobilized within the very structure he seeks to evade.

Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there are several textual cues that suggest Billy Pilgrim's experiences with time travel and alien abduction may not be literal but rather psychological constructs-fantasies born out of trauma and dissociation. A particularly revealing moment occurs when Billy visits an adult bookstore and comes across several science fiction novels written by Kilgore Trout. He picks a book named ‘The Big Board’ and starts reading it. It is about “*an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials*” and “*were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212*” (P 148) which strongly resembles Billy’s own narrative involving his captivity on the planet Tralfamadore. This coincidence implies that Billy's supposed alien experiences may have been subconsciously inspired by Trout’s pulp fiction, rather than actual events. Further evidence of the illusory nature of Billy's Tralfamadorian encounters appears in a sequence where he is lying beside Montana Wildhack, his fellow captive in the alien zoo. As he falls asleep, Billy abruptly finds himself back in his bed on Earth, suggesting that his experiences may be dreamlike projections rather than reality. Significantly, Vonnegut offers no concrete explanation regarding how Billy returns from Tralfamadore, nor does he clarify the fate of Montana Wildhack or the child

Billy supposedly fathered with her. These narrative gaps further support the interpretation that these episodes are fabrications of Billy's mind rather than factual occurrences.

Billy begins discussing his extraterrestrial and temporal dislocations only after surviving a traumatic plane crash and sustaining a serious head injury. His daughter, Barbara, even questions him why he had “*never mentioned any of this before the airplane crash?*” (P 22). Billy is not bothered about whether or not anyone believes in his story. This timing reinforces the theory that Billy's Tralfamadorian tale may be a psychological coping mechanism, emerging only after a severe mental and physical crisis exacerbated by his earlier wartime trauma. Ironically, Billy, who works as an optometrist, a profession dedicated to improving human vision, remains figuratively blind to the distinction between reality and illusion. He justifies his belief in the Tralfamadorian philosophy as a kind of spiritual clarity, stating that he is merely “*prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls*”. However, from a critical standpoint, it becomes evident that Billy himself suffers from a metaphorical myopia, unable or unwilling to confront the brutal truth of his past. His constructed reality serves as a protective veil, shielding him from the psychological devastation wrought by his experiences during the Dresden bombing and the senselessness of war.

The cracks in the American dream show through Billy's apparently successful post-war life. Valencia is a parody of consumerism, since she constantly consumes candy while promising to lose weight in order to please Billy sexually. Billy's son appears to be headed for jail as a teen-ager before he joins the Green Berets and goes off to fight in Vietnam. Even a brief look at

Billy Pilgrim's mental state reveals a classic case of schizophrenia. The shock of war coupled with tragically disillusioning childhood experiences has clearly crippled Billy's ability to lead any kind of normal life-to love or believe in people, work, society or God and has led consequently to withdrawal from human contact into a world of bizarre fantasy. Not that Billy's suffering, his fear of annihilation, is based on delusion. His withdrawal is a natural reaction to the very real terrors of his world and ours.

Billy Pilgrim's life in *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be interpreted as a profound commentary on the existential crisis of the postmodern individual. Vonnegut positions Billy not only as a victim of war but as a symbol of the modern man's disorientation in a world that no longer offers clear meaning, purpose, or moral certainty. Though he outwardly achieves the American Dream; returning from war, building a career as an optometrist, and raising a family, Billy's internal world is marked by a deep and unrelenting existential void. His life is not one of fulfilment but of confusion, detachment, and psychological disintegration. This existential crisis is rooted in Billy's wartime trauma, particularly his experience during the firebombing of Dresden, which exposes him to the absurdity and brutality of human existence. Rather than emerging from the war as a celebrated hero, he returns as a fragmented, "shell-shocked" individual who struggles to make sense of a world that seems irreparably broken. The narrative highlights this psychological dissonance; Billy is expected to reintegrate into a society that prizes order, rationality, and moral progress, yet he has witnessed firsthand-the chaos and senselessness that lie beneath its surface. It was the brutal scenes that he witnessed as a soldier

which made him question the very meaning of life. Whether there is any purpose to one's life? What does existence means after all?

Yet Billy's retreat into this fabricated reality underscores the very nature of his existential crisis. Instead of confronting the absurd, he avoids it by constructing an alternative world where he no longer bears responsibility, where time removes agency, and where death is not final. In this way, Vonnegut critiques not only the trauma of war but also the human tendency to evade the discomfort of existential uncertainty. Billy's failure to reconcile his lived experience with the ideals of the American Dream reflects a broader cultural failure to acknowledge the psychological consequences of modern existence. In a world where traditional narratives of heroism, success, and moral clarity have collapsed, Billy becomes a figure of quiet resistance and resignation. His life is a testimony to the modern condition: the search for meaning in a meaningless world, and the quiet, desperate creation of personal mythologies to fill the void.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the ontological dimension extends beyond conventional boundaries, challenging widely accepted notions such as death, free will, Christianity, biblical narratives like that of Adam and Eve, and even the biological constitution of human beings. This expansion of ontological inquiry underscores the novel's central concern that humanity remains distant from absolute knowledge and that no singular idea can claim universal truth. The reimagining of Adam and Eve within various contexts serves to highlight the novel's philosophical engagement with questions of "the mode of existence". At one point, Billy "*stared into the patina of the corporal's boots and saw Adam and Eve in the golden depth*" (P 53), a moment that metaphorically reflects the human desire to understand origins and meaning.

The invocation of Adam and Eve leads Billy to contemplate fundamental existential questions: “*Where had he come from, and where should he go, now?*” (P 124). The narrative structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself embodies a unique ontology, inviting readers to reflect on the nature of existence through its fragmented, nonlinear form. Vonnegut subtly weaves Biblical allusions throughout its anti-war narrative, not to affirm religious faith, but to critique, reframe, and often satirize it. For Billy Pilgrim, who is trapped in a war-torn, fatalistic, and absurd world, these allusions offer both a symbolic anchor and an ironic commentary on the futility of seeking divine order in chaos. Rather than reinforce Christian ideals, Vonnegut uses Biblical references to underscore Billy’s existential crisis and his struggle for meaning in a universe that appears godless and indifferent. Vonnegut also alludes to Christian martyrdom in Billy’s acceptance of death. Like Christ, Billy foresees his own death and walks toward it willingly. However, while Christ’s death carries the weight of divine purpose, Billy’s is arbitrary and absurd. His assassin, Paul Lazzaro, kills him over a petty wartime grudge. In contrast to Christian theology, where suffering is redemptive, Billy’s martyrdom is meaningless. The allusion exposes the existential void beneath religious structures that once promised comfort and cosmic justice.

Billy Pilgrim emerges as a deeply fragmented and symbolically rich character whose life encapsulates the existential dilemmas of the postmodern individual. His journey is not one of conventional heroism but one marked by psychological disintegration and philosophical despair. At the heart of his narrative lies a profound existential crisis, triggered by the horrific trauma of war which renders traditional structures of meaning and morality inadequate.

Billy's inability to reconcile his wartime experiences with the comforting myths of the American Dream leads to a state of psychic rupture. Instead of confronting the absurdity of his existence head-on, he retreats into an elaborate fantasy world shaped by Kilgore Trout's science fiction. It becomes a mechanism by which Billy evades accountability, agency, and the unbearable weight of suffering, thus illustrating how the human mind constructs meaning as a survival strategy. Ultimately, Billy Pilgrim is not just a character trapped in time but a symbol of the modern condition: lost, traumatized, and endlessly searching for meaning in a world that seems to resist all forms of understanding.

When Billy Pilgrim's fractured identity results from temporal dislocation, Harry August's psychological disintegration stems from the inverse; the oppressive constancy of recurrence. Trapped in the eternal return of the same life, Harry becomes a metaphysical Sisyphus, reliving not only the same historical events but also the accumulated weight of his own personal failures, relationships, and regrets. At the core of *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* lies a profound existential inquiry: What does it mean to live when life repeats, and when death is not the end, but a cycle? "*It is said that there are three stages of life for those of us who live our lives in circles. These are rejection, exploration and acceptance*". By opening with Harry's eleventh death, the novel subverts traditional narrative structure, merging the concepts of beginning and ending. In existential terms, this disruption in linearity foregrounds a world where traditional temporal boundaries no longer determine identity. This sense of recurrence, however, does not absolve Harry of responsibility; rather, it amplifies it. Claire North's portrayal of time is not

liberating but claustrophobic, an ouroboros that tightens its grip with each life, devouring any hope of renewal.

Existentialism, particularly in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre offers an interpretive framework through which Harry's condition can be understood. Nietzsche's concept of the "eternal recurrence" asks whether one could will the same life repeatedly and still find joy and affirmation in it. Harry August fails this test. Rather than a life-affirming recurrence, his experience turns existence into a sentence, one not of death, but of uninterrupted memory. As he bluntly puts it "*Death holds no fear for us. It is rebirth where the terror lies*". In this one sentence, the paradox of his condition is laid bare; he cannot die and yet he cannot live meaningfully either. The significance of the cycle deepens when considered alongside Albert Camus' theory of the absurd, already echoed in Harry's condition. The circularity of his existence mirrors the Sisyphean struggle, endlessly repeating the same motions without final resolution. However, rather than succumbing to despair, Harry, like Camus' absurd hero, embraces the futility and acts with intention. Within the constraints of recurrence, he forges his own purpose, thereby embodying existential resistance through conscious persistence and ethical resolve. When a child appears at Harry's deathbed with an ominous prophecy that the world is ending far sooner than it should, he is thrust into what Sartre would define as "existential anguish", the unsettling awareness that his freedom is inseparable from radical responsibility. The girl's ominous message about the world's end adds a layer of urgency to his identity crisis, compelling readers to reflect on how one's past can shape both present choices and the trajectory of the future. No longer able to passively drift through the repetition of his lives, Harry is

confronted with the need to act. The child's warning thus functions as an existential summons to authenticity, demanding that he engage not only with the fate of the world, but also with the moral weight of his own agency across time.

In Chapter 11, Harry articulates a foundational existential dilemma, *"We are no more and no less than minds"*. Detached from the possibility of forgetting, his mind becomes a battlefield. The mind here is not an organ of liberation but a trap of unceasing vault of recollection that denies him the mercy of erasure. Unlike the linear human whose memory fades and thus allows for renewal, Harry remembers everything. With every rebirth, he carries forward not just knowledge but trauma including the agony of torture, the emotional fallout of failed love, and the moral paralysis that comes with the foresight of catastrophe. This uninterrupted continuity hollows him out. Even pleasure loses substance; epiphany becomes repetition. More than immorality, the burden of memory is what drives Harry toward psychological fracture. Claire North structures Harry's lives not as free-standing narratives but as recursive loops where the weight of the past collapses the present. His interactions with the Cronus Club reinforce this burden. The Club, which should offer kinship, becomes a mirror of moral apathy and detachment. Its members, like Virginia, treat eternity with passivity, refusing to act even in the face of imminent destruction. Their refusal to engage is a kind of existential nihilism is what Harry resists. And yet, resistance itself becomes exhausting. Even as he fights Vincent's deterministic ambitions, Harry acknowledges a gnawing futility *"Nothing I do has any meaning for anything more than myself"*. This line, nestled deep within the narrative, crystallizes the existential despair of knowing

that no act, brave or well-intentioned can permanently alter the condition of his being.

Harry's despair, however, is not purely abstract. It is grounded in a history of personal alienation and familial rupture. Born in a train station restroom to a dying mother, Harry begins life not with promise, but with abandonment. His adoptive parents provide shelter but never complete acceptance. In Chap 21–22, he writes letters to his biological father under a pseudonym, which is an act of emotional ventriloquism that underscores his detachment from familial identity. This foundational trauma, the sense that he was never wanted, echoes throughout his life. It shapes his fundamental relationship with the self. In psychoanalytic terms, Harry's ego is never securely rooted; it is fragmented by rejection, destabilized by over-knowledge, and alienated by the inability to be truly "new" in any life. Harry's engagement with time also introduces profound ethical dilemmas, framed by existential responsibility. Sartre's dictum that humans are "condemned to be free" rings particularly loud in Harry's case. Freedom, in his world, is not the ability to choose among unknown futures, but the responsibility to act knowing exactly what might unfold. He is constantly asked: If you know the future, do you not have an obligation to change it? But action is neither simple nor safe. The torture he undergoes at the hands of Phearson reveals the institutional violence that often arises from deterministic knowledge. Those who want to act violently demand the secrets he holds. Those who want to preserve order beg him to remain silent. The result is paralysis; not of will, but of moral possibility.

Yet, amidst this despair, Harry occasionally reaches for meaning. In Chap 6, as he debates the ethical cost of the "quantum mirror," he questions

whether knowledge itself can justify the human toll “*If in the name of progress we have eaten our souls up, and nothing else matters to us any more...*” The ellipsis here is more than stylistic, it signals existential uncertainty. Progress without humanity is no progress at all. And it is in moments like these, moments of subtle ethical reflection, that Harry resists complete psychological dissolution. He remains painfully aware of what it means to be human, even when surrounded by gods of time and science.

Ultimately, Harry August’s existential crisis is shaped by a confluence of conditions: the curse of perfect memory, the fracture of early trauma, the alienation of infinite recurrence, and the ethical paralysis of foreknowledge. His is not a struggle for survival, but a search for purpose in a closed system. And unlike Billy Pilgrim, who dissolves into fatalism, Harry remains suspended; conscious, anguished, and desperately human.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Time, as a narrative construct, has evolved significantly in modern literary expression. In many contemporary novels, characters encounter an expanded perception of reality, often engaging with layers of time that surpass ordinary chronological boundaries. Time narratives in literature often disrupt traditional linearity, allowing characters to move fluidly across temporal dimensions. These narratives present protagonists who traverse backward, forward, and even upward through time, engaging in experiences that challenge conventional understandings of chronology. Within such narratives, past, present, and future are not fixed points but overlapping layers, examined simultaneously or recursively. The characters' journeys through time are often elusive and abstract, reflecting the complexity of human consciousness and memory. Dream sequences, too, frequently unfold in a timeless realm, further blurring the boundary between reality and imagination. As Ernst Cassirer observes, "Space and time are the framework in which all reality is concerned" suggesting that any narrative manipulation of time inherently reshapes the reader's perception of truth, identity, and reality itself.

While traditional novels often follow the steady rhythm of clocks and calendars, tracking characters as they grow, act, marry, and die in chronological sequence, more recent narratives disrupt this pattern. The conventional structure, as Heremy Hawthorn defines, positions the novel as "concerned with real life of past or present times", often grounded in a linear framework. However, time narratives in literature today frequently abandon strict chronology. In works like *Gulliver's Travels*, we observe vast expansions of

time and space, yet still tethered to earthly timekeeping. By contrast, novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, *Time's Arrow*, and *The Sense of an Ending* construct time as cyclical, fractured, or recursive. The progression of life is no longer continuous; instead, it loops, doubles back, or fragments. This temporal disjunction often serves to question the very nature of reality, suggesting it is neither wholly material nor spiritual, but a layered and elusive dimension. As expressed in the foundational statement of this study: time is a fundamental element of the universe, and the shaping of time within narrative reveals profound truths about perception, memory, and the self.

In *Slaughterhouse-five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* time is constructed and reconstructed as “human existence and history are in some way alienated from the divine” and ... “the individual has become a riddle of himself” and...“the goal and standards of the action are obscure” and ...“the physical cosmos is indifferent”(Copleston). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim’s repeated use of the phrases “So it goes” and “And so on” functions as a linguistic mechanism for coping with the chaos and inevitability of death. These expressions signify his passive engagement with time, where experiences are neither resolved nor transcended, but simply endured. Billy's non-linear journey through life experienced as hallucinations or dreamlike episodes highlights his dependence on time as both a refuge and an elusive answer. In *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, Time is presented in a more structurally coherent yet psychologically taxing relationship with time. Harry does not merely drift through chronology but is trapped within its repetition, compelled to revisit and re-negotiate his identity and moral agency with each rebirth. While

Billy succumbs to temporal dislocation with resignation, Harry's temporality becomes an ethical battleground. Yet, in both narratives, time emerges not as a linear path toward resolution, but as a fragmented continuum where the self is persistently displaced. Through these figures, Vonnegut and North construct a temporality in which meaning is neither fixed nor final, underscoring the existential condition of existing within time without mastery over it.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim, a survivor of World War II, becomes "spastic in time" (P 17), dislocated from chronological life and immersed in episodes of delusion and anesthetized withdrawal. Vonnegut notes that "Billy Pilgrim was having a delightful hallucination" (P 35) and later that the doctors "introduced an anesthetic into Billy's atmosphere now, put him to sleep" (P 55), symbolizing his retreat into an internal universe structured by fantasy rather than causality. In this hallucinatory state, Billy invents a utopia through the Tralfamadorians' conception of time. His embrace of science fiction becomes a metaphysical theology, replacing the now obsolete sacred texts, which Vonnegut remarks "were all theoretically dead now" (P 23). Through this escapism, Billy clings to an eternal present, asserting, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (P 44), thus accepting fatalism as salvation.

Harry August, by contrast, experiences the burden of memory and repetition across fifteen recursive lives. He is not anesthetized from time but trapped within it, possessing a perfect memory of each life lived, which accumulates rather than fades. Unlike Billy, who forgets and hallucinates to cope, Harry remembers painfully and inescapably. While Billy constructs a Tralfamadorian utopia to transcend causality, Harry confronts the moral

consequences of actions across centuries, often in the company of other ouroborans like those in the Cronus Club. In his eleventh life, he is visited on his deathbed by a child bearing a cryptic warning: “The world is ending,” signaling not only temporal collapse but also existential responsibility. This realization fractures Harry’s prior apathy and thrusts him into a role of reluctant saviour. Unlike the Tralfamadorian passivity, Harry’s knowledge demands action, particularly against Vincent, whose manipulation of time threatens the integrity of all lives to come. Both characters engage with time as something fundamentally broken. However, while Billy floats passively within a Heraclitean universe of ceaseless change, Harry must intervene within that flux. Billy seeks metaphysical consolation; Harry struggles with moral agency. For Billy, the war shatters any coherent sense of progression, and time becomes an abstract sanctuary from pain. For Harry, memory is the battlefield, and his endless resurrections serve not as solace but as existential torment, forcing him to ask, again and again, what it means to live decently in a world where history resets, but consequences do not disappear. Their divergent responses to temporal disruption reveal two sides of postmodern subjectivity: one hallucinates eternity to evade pain; the other carries memory like a wound, refusing to forget.

Though different in genre and tone, each novel uses a defining catastrophic event, the bombing of Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the accelerating apocalypse in *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* as the pivotal incident around which the protagonist’s understanding of time, self, and morality fractures and reconstitutes. These events are not only structurally

central, but philosophically transformative, forcing both Billy Pilgrim and Harry August to confront the nature of existence in radically non-linear ways.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, World War II, particularly the firebombing of Dresden serves as the core trauma from which Billy's psychological rupture emerges. As a POW, Billy survives the bombing by sheltering in a slaughterhouse, only to emerge into a devastated cityscape that defies comprehension. His consciousness, unable to process the atrocity, fractures into what Vonnegut terms "time travel," a condition in which "*Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next*". The event's psychological impact is so profound that Billy retreats into an internal fantasy. In this structure, the bombing of Dresden is not merely historical, it is existentially destabilizing, and Billy's retreat into non-linear perception is his only available coping mechanism.

Similarly, in *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, a world-ending catastrophe functions as the core structural and philosophical crisis. Harry's existence becomes shaped not by historical memory, but by anticipatory dread, and the realization that someone within the Kalachakra community is manipulating science to bring about this premature end. Where Billy's trauma lies in the past, Harry's lies in the future, and yet both characters experience time as a field of chaos, outside the bounds of human control. The role of institutions also serves as a point of comparison. Billy Pilgrim is placed in a military and psychiatric structure that attempts to normalize or suppress his perceptions of time, symbolizing society's desire to suppress individual trauma beneath collective apathy.

The psychological tensions that define *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* revolve around characters who are thrust into extraordinary temporal conditions and forced to confront the absurdity of existence. Billy Pilgrim's psychological fragmentation leads him to reject the randomness of death, for if death is arbitrary, then life too risks becoming void of purpose. In this invented structure, Billy finds solace, having found no lasting comfort in love, vocation, or religious faith; institutions that traditionally provide stability in the American cultural imagination. Like Billy, Harry August grapples with the disorienting weight of time and memory. Harry eventually resists temporal fatalism. When confronted with the accelerating end of the world, Harry chooses action over resignation, assuming ethical responsibility to break the loop and preserve the future. Both characters embody responses to existential crisis: Billy retreats into illusion to survive the trauma of meaninglessness, while Harry confronts that meaninglessness through moral agency. Together, they represent contrasting psychological outcomes in the face of time's fragmentation.

As the characters are machine-minders, their perception of time aligns more closely with non-linear patterns shaped by irrational, subconscious, and psychological dimensions. Ultimately, it can be said that time is not experienced as fixed or absolute in these narratives. Instead, the central characters across the two novels interpret time through their personal psychology, lived experiences, individual awareness, and the conditions of their surrounding environment. In doing so, they often show a preference for earlier time whether past memories or previous lives over the uncertain present or the unknowable future.

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