So It Goes

The intertextual connections within Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse V* and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, though abundant, are guised, respectively, in modern and antiquated settings. Bunyan’s work tells the story of Christian, an everyman on an allegorical journey from his home to the Celestial City. Vonnegut’s character, Billy Pilgrim (note the significance of the surname) epitomizes the Protestant belief of what a man should be: successful, wealthy, and hard-working. Additionally, the realm of the four-dimensional Tralfamadore can be seen as a direct parallel of the omnipotent Christian God. The absurdity of Tralfamadore can also parallel a dream sequence which is what Bunyan’s work is presented as, a long dream sequence. Both authors state that the reason for the writing of this book came from their want to detail crippling subjective experiences: this is only cemented by the fact that Bunyan wrote his work while being held captive in jail and the fact that Vonnegut actually was a prisoner-of-war during the Dresden bombings which take place in *Slaughterhouse V*. Stemming from the captivity narrative, both authors even offer their own difficulty coming up with the right words to properly describe this captivity. Vonnegut writes, “I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen ... But not many words came from my mind ...” (Vonnegut). Bunyan writes a similar thought; “Yet I did not think to shew to all the world my pen and ink in such a mode; I only thought to make I knew not what; nor did I undertake thereby to please my neighbour; no, not I. I
did it mine own self to gratify” (Bunyan). Both characters are on existential journeys, and, while vastly different, the journeys are more alike than not whether Billy Pilgrim’s journey is an inversion of Christian’s or not. The two novels’ autobiographical nature and influence of captivity by the authors’ experiences are what make these two works so effective and enthralling, for an author offering up something real and tangible that they experienced is a great way to read about history. Both works can somewhat be read as a primary source seeing as how the authors’ personal accounts are written heavily within the pages.

The similarities in Vonnegut’s novel are striking to that of Bunyan’s novel. The protagonist/narrator/author of both of these works have been blurred so that the audience may have trouble discerning who is who. It is quite obvious though that Billy Pilgrim is a representation of Vonnegut himself while Christian can be seen as a representation of Bunyan. The captivity narrative employed by both works and both authors’ allegorical elements of Christian and Billy Pilgrim make these novels more authentic, engaging, and relevant. The captivity narrative also delivers a somewhat fatalistic tone throughout the stories of Bunyan and Vonnegut. Vonnegut’s fatalism is shown through the repetition of one phrase; “So it goes” (Vonnegut). This phrase is uttered, whether by Billy Pilgrim or the narrator, every time a death occurs in the novel: the phrase reinforces the idea that the protagonist views life and death as mundane and inevitable. In The Pilgrim’s Progress, the beliefs of Christianity make up the work and are set to an allegorical point-of-view of Bunyan’s himself. These beliefs, in a sense, are fatalistic themselves, and the dilemmas that Christian gets himself in are very similar to those of Billy. In Alex Vernon’s book, Soldiers Once and Still, he discusses that Vonnegut’s book is an evocation of Bunyan’s work, and both books serve as a device for questioning the possibility of spiritual gain by waging wars. These two books show the reader differing wars in which we, as
humans, partake in, and they also show the vastly different effects that these “wars’ can have on a person.

John Bunyan’s reflection on finding oneself amidst existential crisis is one of a serious and deeply heartfelt allegory while Vonnegut’s reflection shows the absurdity of war through a disjointed nonlinear narrative. The captivity that these two authors faced during their time has helped them paint vivid pictures with fantastic imagery in order to make an impact on the reader during the respective time that these two books were published. One interesting parallel is between the scene where Christian is being held captive in the city of Vanity while Faithful is tried and executed by being burned and the scene where Billy Pilgrim is working in Dresden as a prisoner-of-war when the bombings occur and many people are being burned to death due to the explosions. It is also interesting that on the four-dimensional planet of Tralfamadore, Billy is treated with intrigue, and he is given a small place to live, food, and an attractive woman to preoccupy himself with. In Bunyan’s story, Christian’s goal is to get to the Celestial City where God will be waiting for him to provide him with all that he needs. Looking at human nature, usually an epiphany or a “moment of clarity” occurs during a dark, traumatic, or tumultuous time in a person’s life; Vonnegut’s Dresden mirrors that of Bunyan’s the Slough of Despond; “Billy finds the war a vast Slough of Despond. He reaches Dresden, which ‘looked like a Sunday school picture of heaven to Billy Pilgrim’ (Vonnegut, 129), only to witness the Heavenly City’s destruction” (Vanderwerken, 49). Bunyan’s captivity in jail and Vonnegut’s captivity in Dresden had a huge impact on the incorporation of dreams within the two works. Dreams can be seen as a form of escape, and when one is being held captive, any form of escape is sure to be greeted with great enthusiasm. As aforementioned, Christian’s journey to the Celestial City can be seen as one giant dream, whereas Vonnegut’s fictional realm, Tralfamadore is seen as a somewhat, dream or
green world. English professor, Lawrence Broer goes so far to say that *Tralfamadore* is actually an acronym for “or fatal dream,” playing on the fatalistic outlook that Tralfamadorians have.

The actual journey itself set out by the two characters are existential journeys by an “everyday man,” and the settings that these two protagonists interact with are analogous as well: The Slough of Despond can be viewed as Dresden, the Hill of Difficulty as the Grand Canyon, and Vanity Fair as Carlsbad Caverns. The city of Dresden, before it gets bombed, is seen by the American prisoners-of-war as a beautiful as Heaven before it was fire-bombed. This is a strong parallel when Christian tells his wife that he is for certain that their city will burn with a fire from Heaven. While Vonnegut’s work is a clear inverted parody of Bunyan’s, *Slaughterhouse V* still carries overt religious themes through the character of Billy. In the *Twayne’s United States Authors* series volume on Kurt Vonnegut, about the protagonist's name, Stanley Schatt says: “By naming the unheroic hero Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut contrasts John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim’s Progress* with Billy's story. As Wilfrid Sheed has pointed out, Billy's solution to the problems of the modern world is to "invent a heaven, out of 20th century materials, where Good Technology triumphs over Bad Technology. His scripture is Science Fiction, Man's last, good fantasy" (Schatt). Pilgrim is described as having a “meek faith in Jesus,” and he even goes on to become an evangelist for the Tralfamadorians. Pilgrim’s newly adopted belief and want for evangelism mirrors the Puritan beliefs that were held in Bunyan’s time. Puritanism stated that its followers were to be instruments of God, espousing the ideology of their religion. Pilgrim does this when he starts making corrective lenses for people out of fear that they might not be able to see his little green alien friends of Tralfamadore.

The theme of death is huge in both novels whether it is an existential death, a physical death, or a spiritual death. Puritan beliefs, like most Christian beliefs, state that death is merely
the next step to eternity. Puritans hold the physical death as an act where the soul goes up into Heaven, or The Celestial City, where it will reside forever in wondrous languor. Death in Vonnegut’s work is merely a physical act that happens when a human being has reached the end of the line; this is further cemented by the saying “so it goes” throughout the novel. With death aside, on their search throughout life, both protagonists try to find meaning; “this hero has at his center something of a vacuum, for he does not know who he is…however, it is precisely this ‘vacuum’ at the centre of Billy Pilgrim that defines him, because the character who ‘does not know who he is’ is exactly that. He is an epitome of the Puritan sensibility; the pilgrim who searches for a self” (Hinchcliffe, 190).

While there is not much written on the correlation between Slaughterhouse V and The Pilgrim’s Progress, there are a few select articles that detail these correlations to a great extent. Hinchcliffe’s article was mesmerizing in how he connected so many things and ideas to each book. From dreams and religious canonical elements to the characters, setting, and chronology, there are a myriad of things to be examined when reading these two books. In the end of these two books, the character reaches the denouement. Christian with his Celestial City and Billy with his Dresden. Billy exclaims that Dresden, one a beautiful city, not resembles the moon, “nothing but minerals” (Vonnegut). It can be seen that the end place where Billy arrives is a metaphorical Hell and not a paradise like in Bunyan’s work. If this is the case, then Billy’s idea of Heaven has been reduced to nothing but rubble which complements his fatalistic outlook on life and death in a holistic manner. The aspects of dreams, death, journey, and contentment are all integrated within these two novels, and the correlation that they have with each other is striking. One can view Vonnegut’s work as a modern American version of John Bunyan’s classic work. By putting
a modern twist on the plot and setting, Vonnegut is able to effectively relay the message of fatalism and finding oneself amidst a sick and terrible world.
Works Cited


Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five: or, The Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death.*