Narrative disruption is a literary technique that many prose authors use to describe an impediment, detour, diversion, or digression in the plots of novels or short stories. It is used to alter the flow of the plot to add other elements to the plot. In both of the novel Atonement by Ian McEwan and Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut, narrative disruption acts as a vital component of the plot. Neither of these stories follow a conventional chain of events because of various embedded disruptions. In Atonement, McEwan uses Paul Marshall’s character and Briony’s character as impediments to the fairy-tale-like romance between Robbe and Cecilia, and in Slaughterhouse Five, Vonnegut uses detour and diversion to describe how Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time.

Robbie and Cecilia are both characters who have lived near each other their entire lives, and who attended college together. They never really interacted because of the subliminal limitations of class difference. Robbie relied on Cecilia’s family funding for his own medical education, and there was obvious guilt attached to that. However, the summer after college, the two of them were confined within the isolated estate of the Turners, and this confined quality of the setting provoked interaction. At first sights the novel, each detail of their budding relationship was contingent on the preceding detail and everything seemed to flow chronologically. For example, Robbie and Cecilia engaged in a small argument by the fountain which slowly escalated into the physical breaking of Cecilia’s family vase: an important vase revered from
Ancient China. This fight led to heightened tensions between the two of them because there was importance attached to the rate. Following this event, Bobbie composed an apologetic letter to Cecilia and sent it to her, but accidentally sent her a more risqué message. This led to Cecilia’s changed perception of Bobbie, which ultimately led to their making love in the library.

McEwan takes the reader on a chronological journey through their relationship. The reader is left feeling tense during their argumentative scenes, and is fully current as to where they are. This relationship will unfold. The slow, chronological nature of their first part leaves the reader praying for the success of Bobbie and Cecilia. However, McEwan does not continue writing the story with this hyper-focus on chronology. He puts the love story in the eyes of Briony, Cecilia’s sister and rewrites this exact chain of events focusing on her perspective. She views the fight that Bobbie and Cecilia have from the small window in her room. The small size of the window symbolized the limited sense of this relationship that Briony holds. She is an eleven-year-old girl who is motivated solely by her selfishness and desire to grow up. Naturally, she uses this perspective to interpret the fight at the fountain to be about a different topic than it actually was about. She quickly receives the letter from Bobbie to deliver to Cecilia, and out of curiosity, opens it up before it gets to Cecilia. This is the first time Briony is exposed to the sexual vocabulary in the letter, and immediately assumes that if Bobbie is using these words, he is a deranged man.

This change in perspective but repetition of events is McEwan’s way of diverting the plot and tempering.
with chronology. The reader knows that the nature of Robbie and Cecilia’s relationship was from mutual love, not from Robbie’s sin suity. However, this lack of clarity that Briony has caused her to obtain a false sense of certainty about her perception of Robbye as an insane man caused her to ultimately accuse him of raping her cousin, Lola, when it was really Paul Marshall who did it. Briony’s uncertainty acted as an impediment to the plot of the story, and Robbye and Cecilia’s fairytale-like relationship is cut short.

McEwan strengthens his use of impediment by describing Robbie’s sleep decline in satisfaction from the beginning of the novel to the middle/end of the novel. He begins by describing the scene when he is in his room composing the letter he reminisces on his own sense of freedom and daydreams in great depth about his future as a doctor and his future with Cecilia. He goes on to a long tangent about the book that would fill the yellow shelf of his home and how he would expose himself to human suffering through literature. This is in stark contrast to his description of his own characterisation as he is spending time in the army (the punishment for “raping” Lola) He describes the rhythm of the war and how he was never taught how to live with or the common sense and need for survival that he currently lives with. He is directly exposed to human suffering, in contrast to when he daydreams about his literacy. He is later killed off by war.

This is all due to Briony acting as an impediment to the story because she was guided by self-interest.
In "Slaughterhouse-Five," Vonnegut also uses narrative dislocation because Billy Pilgrim's entire perspective is non-chronological. Billy Pilgrim is suffering from hallucinations that take him to his life before, during, and after his time in World War II. He hallucinates as a coping mechanism as to what he was exposed to in World War II.
The diversions that take place in the novel through time symbolize the vast dehumanization change in mentality a soldier gets after fighting in a war. This use of disruption shows how the story goes against convention. The chronology of a war story: At the beginning of the story, Kurt Vonnegut himself narrates it in first-person, explaining his motives for telling Billy Pilgrim's story. Before the narrative even begins, Vonnegut speaks to a man who believes war to be inevitable, and that war will always come based on the chronology of life. The man compares war to glaciers, and says "writing an anti-war story is about as impossible as writing an anti-glacier story." This man's fervent conviction that war cannot be either satirized or avoided in a novel is bolstered by his comparison to glaciers. However, Vonnegut disproves this by his use of diversion throughout the story.
Billy Pilgrim's hallucinations often take him to the planet of Tralfamadore, a place where the Tralfamadoreans believe in the chronology of time and view every event in life to be occurring at once. They describe
their view of events as being the same as a human's view of a mountain range: seemingly unlimited, vast, and jagged, but everything is occurring at once. The Tralfamadorians view the human perception of time as absurd and meaningless, and they are pitying of the humans' inability to predict death, war, and the end of time itself. Billy Pilgrim adopts his values from these of the Tralfamadorians, and they influence the way he lives the rest of his diverted life.

This perspective allows him to devalue death, symbolized by his frequent use of the phrase "so it goes." After any character in the story dies, Billy Pilgrim no longer feels the insatiable need to reassess events out chronologically. Pilgrim's affinity toward diverted time is outlined when he watches a war movie forward and backward. As he is watching the movie backward, Vonnegut describes the details of the movie. He notes the benefit: "...bitter sucked back into the planes..." the soldiers turning in their uniforms and going back to high school, and he describes Billy Pilgrim extrapolating these events to the beginning of human existence, Adam and Eve. Vonnegut again summarizes the idea of the inevitability of war in this scene. He strengthens the notion to alter time to the idea of being able to alter time to find an inner peace by showing how Billy Pilgrim altered the time in the movie to eventually
lead him to the peaceful images of Adam and Eve—pure biblical figures.

Narrative disruption is used in Atonement to show how a child’s selfish motives can ruin the relationship of two adults. Brian’s impediment and the use of diversion to her perspective shows how an entire plot can be destroyed by misinterpretation. This story could have been told chronologically, but from Brian’s outside perspective runs the theme of chronology. In Slaughterhouse Five, narrative disruption is used to satirize the idea that war is inevitable. It is used to show that war can be avoided if people are not so focused on chronology. Narrative disruption is an important tool in both of these novels to show how chronology does not necessarily define a story.