Here are Vonnegut’s five story arcs:

**Story Arc 1: Man in Hole**
You will see this story over and over again. People love it, and it is not copyrighted. The story is “Man in Hole,” but the story needn’t be about a man or a hole. It’s simply this: somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again. It is not accidental that the line ends up higher than where it began. This is encouraging to readers.

**Story Arc 2: Boy Meets Girl**
Another story arc is called “Boy Meets Girl,” but this needn’t be about a boy meeting a girl. It’s this: somebody, an ordinary person, on a day like any other day, comes across something perfectly wonderful: “Oh boy, this is my lucky day!” Then mishaps are encountered, the person falls down, and in the end gets back up again and prevails.

**Story Arc 3: Cinderella**
One of the most popular stories ever told starts down near the bottom of the G-I axis, with a despondent girl of fifteen or sixteen. Her mother had died, so why wouldn’t she be low? Additionally, her father got married almost immediately to a terrible battle-axe with two mean daughters who treat this girl like a servant. Things are about as bad as they can get for this girl. You’ve heard this story?

There’s to be a party at the palace. The girl has to help her two stepsisters and her dreadful stepmother get ready to go, but she herself has to stay home. Is she even sadder now? No, she’s already a broken-hearted little girl. The death of her mother is enough. Things can’t get any worse than that. So okay, they all leave for the party. Her fairy godmother shows up, gives her pantyhose, mascara, and a means of transportation to get to the party. This creates an incremental rise up the G-I axis.

Better still, when the girl shows up to this fancy party, she’s the belle of the ball, placing her storyline now near the top of that G-I axis. She is so heavily made up that her relatives don’t even recognize her. Then the clock strikes twelve, as promised, and it’s all taken away again. It doesn’t take long for a clock to strike twelve times, so she drops down. Does she drop down to the same level? Absolutely not. No matter what happens after that, she’ll remember when the prince was in love with her and she was the belle of the ball. So she meanders along, at her considerably improved level, no matter what, and the shoe fits, and she becomes off-scale happy forevermore.
Story Arc 4: Kafka

Now there’s a Franz Kafka story—Kafka is an author you will read in high school or college—that begins down near the bottom of the G-I axis. A young man is rather unattractive and not very personable. He has disagreeable relatives and has had a lot of jobs with no chance of promotion. He doesn’t get paid enough to take his girl dancing or to go out on the town with a friend. One morning he wakes up, it’s time to go to work again, and he discovers he has turned into a cockroach, which is where his line goes pretty nearly to the bottom of the G-I axis and stays there forevermore. It’s a pessimistic story.

Story Arc 5: Hamlet, or Neither Good News Nor Bad News

In one of Shakespeare’s masterpieces, Hamlet, Hamlet’s situation is the same as Cinderella’s, except that the genders are reversed. His father has just died. He’s despondent, and right away his mother went and married his uncle, who’s a jerk. So Hamlet is going along on the same level as Cinderella when his friend Horatio comes up to him and says, “Hamlet, listen, there’s this thing up in the parapet; I think maybe you’d better talk to it. It’s your dad.” So Hamlet goes up and talks to this fairly substantial apparition there, and this thing says, “I’m your father; I was murdered; you must avenge me; it was your uncle did it; here’s how.”

Well, was this good news or bad news? To this day we don’t know if that ghost was really Hamlet’s father, and neither does Hamlet. Nevertheless, he says okay, I can check this out. I’ll hire actors to act out the way the ghost said my father was murdered by my uncle, and I’ll put on this show and see what my uncle makes of it. So he puts on this show, but it’s not like some television courtroom drama. His uncle doesn’t go crazy and say, “I-I-you got me, you got me, I did it, I did it.” It flops. Neither good news nor bad news. After this flop, Hamlet ends up talking with his mother when the drapes move, so he thinks his uncle is back there and he says, “All right, I am so sick of being so indecisive,” and he sticks his rapier through the drapery. Well, who falls out? This windbag, Polonius, a character Shakespeare regards as a fool and quite disposable.

You know, dumb parents think that the advice that Polonius gave to his kids when they were going away was what parents should always tell their kids, and it’s the dumbest possible advice, and Shakespeare even thought it was hilarious. Polonius advises, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.” Yet what else is life but endless lending and borrowing, give and take?

Polonius continues his advice thusly: “This above all, to thine own self be true.” Be an egomaniac! Neither good news nor bad news.

After murdering Polonius, Hamlet didn’t get arrested. He’s prince. He can kill anybody he wants. So he goes along, and finally he gets in a duel, and he’s killed. Well, where did he go in the afterlife? Was he judged just or malicious? Did he do right or did he do wrong? Quite a
difference. Cinderella or Kafka’s cockroach? So we don’t know whether it’s good news or bad news.

So what we have is a flat story arc—no arc at all, which is the antithesis of what we have been discussing. However, there’s a reason we recognize *Hamlet* as a masterpiece: it’s that Shakespeare told us the truth, and people so rarely tell us the truth in this rise and fall of story arc. The truth is, we know so little about life that we don’t really know what the good news is and what the bad news is.