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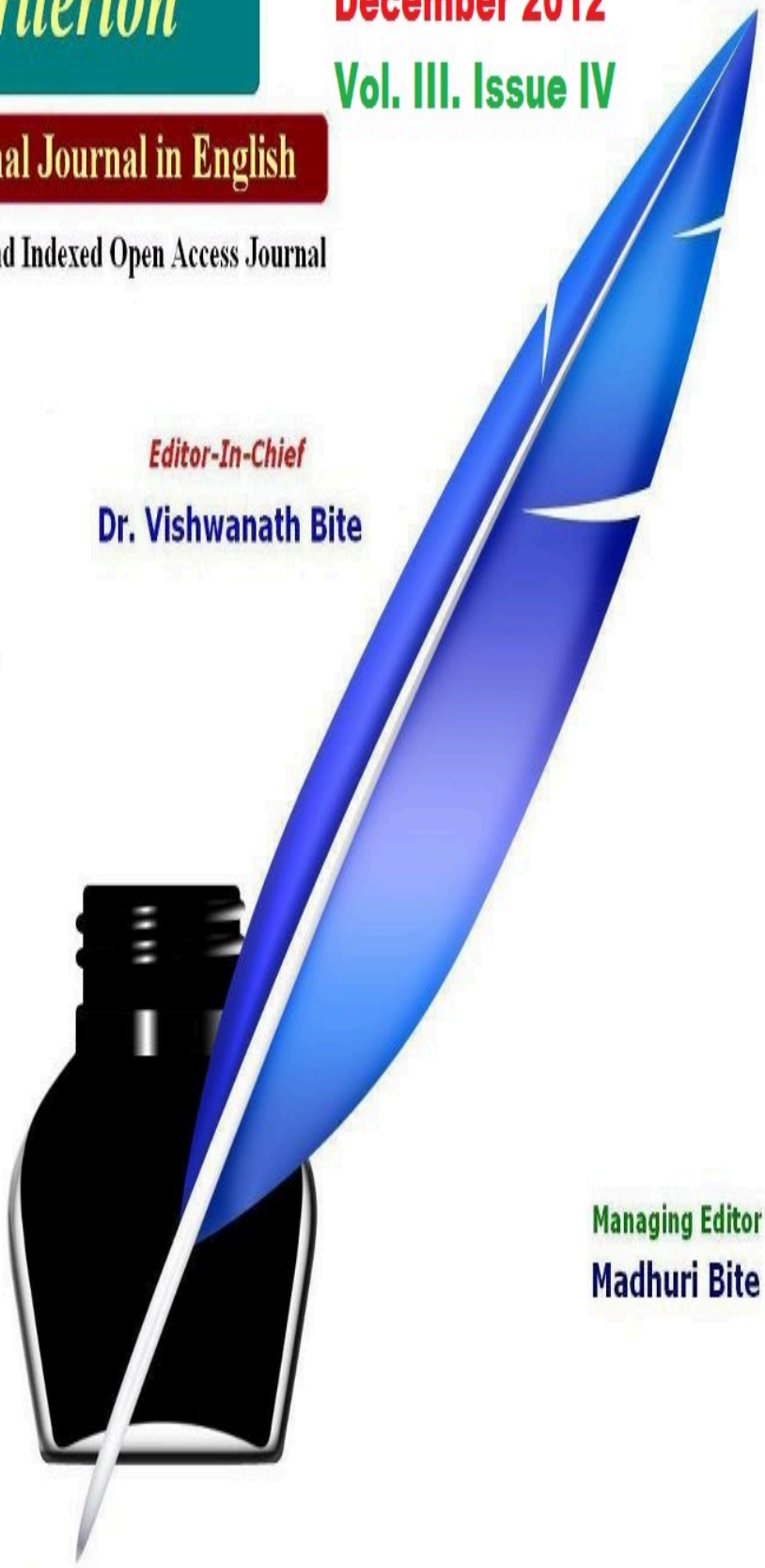

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Adam in Post-War American Fiction: A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

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Twentieth century American novel seems to have drifted not much from its original course, however, the conflict and tension have increased, characters have become more complex and the dimensions broadened. In American fiction written after World War II, the hero, who once started his journey as an Adam, becomes a victim who is plunged again and again into the disruptive rituals of the actual world. Theorists of American fiction like R W B Lewis dismiss the possibility of an Adamic hero in post-war fiction. However, Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut's alter-ego and fictional protagonist of his celebrated novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), presents himself as an Adamic literary figure who becomes the embodiment of a prelapsarian man. A study of Billy Pilgrim's role in the novel suggests that the American Adam has evolved, rather than disappeared. His journey takes place in a different landscape; however, he is still innocent, still morally uncorrupted by a postlapsarian world. He desires not only to raise himself above the taint, but somehow to save another. He lives in a completely industrialized world, and must take his Eden where he can find it.

American novelists of the late nineteenth century and twentieth century have been quite adept at creating deep memorable characters. These novelists often used their protagonists for higher purposes, such as endeavouring to construct a critique of the times by placing the characters in opposition to their respective societies. As a result, in American novel, the hero often became an unassuming type of hero who courageously defied the conventional beliefs and ignorant assumptions of society. The American fictional hero is constantly confronted by an ugly challenging reality; that is society and its pressures of conformity. In American tradition society is never a neutral force; rather it is intrusively active force which encroaches on the lives of individuals. The hero can never ignore or neglect it. He is forced to fight against a suffocating society and repelling reality.

In American tradition, novelists have always taken the term "New World" with literal seriousness. America was perceived not as paradise regained, but as the original paradise, a world starting up again and a second chance for human race. This sense of beginning anew gave birth to a new type of hero who shook off the European baggage of the past and could be seen at the threshold of experience. The most remarkable characteristic of American hero was his innocence and was identified most readily with, as R.W.B Lewis observes, Adam before the fall. Writers like Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Cooper and Henry James created the identity of an initiatory protagonist who was "morally prior" (Lewis 1955: 128-29) to the world he inhabited. The first hero to take plunge into this world is James Fennimore Cooper's Deerslayer. He is a self-reliant young man who seems to have sprung from nowhere. But, after Deerslayer, there begins the march of complex and sometimes tragic heroes of Hawthorne, Melville and Henry James etc. With the arrival of Hawthorne and Melville on the literary scene the American hero-quester moves into a darker universe. The Emersonian "single genuine self against the world" (Lewis 1955: 195) becomes the solitary self pitted against an alien, hostile indifferent world.

The evolution of American hero as Adam in the fiction of New World begins with Natty Bumpoo, the hero of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales.* From Natty Bumpoo to Robert Montgomery Bird's Nathan Slaughter there is shift in character of hero in response to the new environment. Nathan is an innocent man of love transformed by a collision with evil. In American fiction Nathan Slaughter becomes the first figure of an outraged Adam, "hurled out of Eden by a visitation of the devil" (Lewis 1955: 109). In Nathaniel Hawthorne and after him in Melville the isolated hero, who is at war with the social norms, begins to replace Adamic personality in the New World. Heroes of Hawthorne and Melville are complex and at times tragic figures; disillusioned and lost. In fact the whole range of the American novels from Cooper to Hemingway is a re-enactment of this lostness or the sense of isolation. Heroes like Hester, Ahab, Huck Finn or Santiago etc. may show heroic endurance, but they only enhance the tragic dimensions. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain created prototype of American fictional hero whose predicament is an archetypal one and has been shared by heroes till this day. Reality is viewed through the innocent but troubled eyes of boy-hero Huck Finn whose eyes are set on the frontier in which "the present and future have been merged into an organic presence of the past" (Rao 1979: 3). The boy-hero achieves his education in selfhood by fleeing from the school of civilization into the wilderness of innocence. Huck's gesture of adolescent resistance symbolically represents "an affirmation of the dream of freedom and a limitless self-expansion as constituting the education of the American Adam" (Rao 1979: 3). Unlike Mark Twain, Henry James presents a different mode of education for his hero. The Jamesian hero is not a reluctant adolescent as Huck Finn. He is rather hospitable to the general chances of life; however a Jamesian hero mostly fails in his American mission.

Twentieth century American novel seems to have drifted not much from its original course. The conflict and tension have increased, characters have become more complex and the dimensions broadened. During and after the First World War a new cycle of literary growth and maturity came into existence in American tradition. By 1940s and 50s novelists like Hemingway, Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Farrell, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Malamud and a host of others had established themselves as major literary talents in America. All these novelists follow and perpetuate the tradition rather than altering it. Like their predecessors, heroes of these novelists are also at odds with their respective social orders. For instance, heroes of Thomas Wolfe grapple with the society they inhabit and are defeated. Steinbeck hero laments the exploitation of a common man by a society controlled by rich, but at the same time he believes in the possibility of improving the social order. And heroes of Farrell are victims of a hopeless social order. These heroes share certain characteristics of the heroes of Melville, Cooper and Thoreau who dramatise the condition of an isolated individual on the outskirts of society.

The American hero is a rebel who struggles not only for survival, but also for improving the social institutions. In American fiction written after the Second World War, the hero is plunged again and again into the disruptive rituals of the actual world. For example, in novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow, the hero is willing to cope with as much of the world as is available to him, without ever completely submitting to the world's determining categories. Ellison's hero is a nameless Negro, Salinger's an unstable adolescent and Bellow's hero is an obliquely oriented Chicago Jew. What they have in common is the heritage of "moral priority" they inherit from their predecessors. Each of these heroes represent the potentialities of the

classical American hero and behind these heroes stand their Adamic predecessors like Arthur Mervin, Pierre, Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Huck Finn and all others.

On the other hand, R. W. B. Lewis dismisses the Adamic hero as very unlikely in post-World-War II America. "The Emersonian figure – 'the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self' – has been frowned quite out of existence" (Lewis 1955: 195). He does not dismiss the ideal of Adam entirely: "there is, undoubtedly, an occasional vitality in American fiction. And wherever we find it, we encounter again traces of the hopeful or Adamic tradition, seen . . . in a comic or ironic perspective" (Lewis 1955: 196-97); however, he does call the modern Adamic figures "inadequate". Ihab Hassan, in *Radical Innocence*, sees Lewis's perspective as pervasive in modern literary studies. According to Hassan, contemporary hero "confront[s] experience and [recoils] again to preserve its sanity or innocence" (Hassan 1961: 4), just as his predecessors did. Adamic figures must come to terms with the world in which they live in order to be content. He must either create his own Eden within a specific society, as did Natty Bumpoo, or he must find a way to live within the world and preserve his innocence as Huck Finn did.

Douglas Robinson, in his book *American Apocalypses* (1985), postulates that the Adamic figure accomplishes this dream through a sort of personal apocalypse. Robinson, who agrees with Lewis on the literary identity of the American as Adam, writes that "[the] apocalyptic path to happiness . . . lies either backward, to a lost childhood world of "freshness" and "newness," or forward to a future utopia, at echnologically advanced society . . . two paths, one dream" (Douglas 1985: 69). Robinson's accurately named "metaleptic apocalypse" is found in a self who rejects the existing in favour of an apocalypse of the soul unwilling to partake of the postlapsarian corruption of humanity (1985: 70). In this instance, the metalepsis involves a metaphorical substitution within the soul for the deceitful and false happiness offered by the corrupt society, such as the river and the raft of Huckleberry Finn. The two paths of Robinson's apocalypse, progression and regression, both serve the same end, the creation of a self unfettered by the sin and evil engendered by the Fall of Man.

Kurt Vonnegut's most recognized novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or, *The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death*, tells the story of the most successful massacre of civilians in history, the Dresden firebombing in World War II, during which he was kept as a prisoner of war in a Dresden slaughterhouse. The novel brings together all of Vonnegut's notions about the human condition and contemporary American society, as seen through the eyes of Billy Pilgrim, an "innocent Adam falling into the terrible wisdom of the twentieth century" (Reed 2001: 10). While Billy has much in common with the American Adams of pre-war era, his character and story are vastly different, differences that some might say preclude his inclusion as a modern American Adam. Like his fictional predecessors, Billy possesses a naiveté which experience cannot destroy: he is ultimately innocent, and must find a method by which he can come to understand the modern, fallen world. That method is precisely what sets him apart from other American Adamic figures. "Billy Pilgrim," Vonnegut tells us, "has come unstuck in time" (*SF* 23).

Several critics have called Billy a fantasist, claiming that he engages in fantasy in order to avoid real life. They claim he is delusional, citing the fact that the first time Billy becomes "unstuck in time," he has just suffered a head injury. Even if this is so, his fantasies, like the lies of Huck Finn, are purely defensive, even protective, and are contrasted with those of others. Billy's fantasies, however, are about Eden, about how to improve the lives of others. It is within Billy's time traveling, fantasy or no, that we find one of the most identifiably Edenic scenes in modern literature: the "zoo" episode on the planet Tralfamadore, in which a naked Billy Pilgrim

and mate live in an environment created specifically for them, with all requirements needed to sustain a happy life present. The novel is believed to be anti- government, as it reflects the government of the United States in such a horrific light. It is precisely here that the Adamic nature of Billy Pilgrim begins to assert itself. Billy is anti-government. He is outside society and must discover how to deal with the commonplace occurrence of death and suffering on a grand scale. In a 1973 interview to Playboy magazine, Vonnegut explains this moral dilemma:

> When we went into the war, we felt our Government was a respecter of life, careful about not injuring civilians . . . Well, Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it (Standish 95).

This assertion echoes Ihab Hassan's statement about the innocent hero in modern fiction, the dilemma faced by those who write of innocence, of Adam, in the postwar world. "The alienation of self," he writes, "its response to martyrdom or rebellion or both to the modern experience, has been briefly observed in history . . . [which] predicts no salvation for man and accords no meaning . . . to his efforts" (20). Hassan tells us, further, that what "the world faces ultimately depends on man's response to the destructive elements in his experience. Nowhere is that response more richly articulated than in the modern novel" (20).

Billy, like Huckleberry Finn, is an outsider, morally and intellectually. He wants nothing more than to help his fellow men, address the difficulties presented by a hypocritical and destructive society. Like all American Adamic figures, Billy must confront and conquer the most pressing evil witnessed in his life. The hellish landscape of death through which Billy must travel following the bombing of Dresden becomes, in his eyes, the literal fall of man. Particularly important is the continual recurrence of Edenic imagery, even a literal personal Eden. By the end of the novel, Billy recognizes the contemptibility of the fallen world and begs his fellow men to refuse a part in that contemptibility (Merrill 179).

Billy's status as outsider, his fundamental goodness and innocence, are established early in the novel. Vonnegut emphasizes Billy's isolation in relation to his fellow soldiers throughout the novel. Following the Battle of the Bulge, when Billy "tags along" (*SF* 32) with three other soldiers, Vonnegut presents us with a sharp contrast. The first three soldiers are identifiable martial figures, bearing weapons and ready for action, after whom plods Billy, "empty-handed, bleakly ready for death, [with] no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots . . . he didn't look like a soldier at all" (*SF* 32-3). Roland Weary, the antitank gunner, becomes Billy's first encounter with adult evil. Even as an adult, Billy is sexually innocent as is obvious from his encounter with Weary, who represents moral corruption that has plagued American society.

Billy leads a life revered as the American Dream. Indeed, his life is almost a caricature of that Dream: he is wealthy, has a wife, two children, and even a dog named Spot. Prosperity, in Billy's case, has little to do with peace of mind. He goes to a psychiatrist, who cannot understand Billy's empathy. The psychiatrist, a representative of society whose values are inferior to those it judges as warped in Billy, isolates Billy for two hours a day by making him go to his empty house and nap (Reed 18).

Edenic imagery and environments are recurrent throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* From the moment Billy becomes "unstuck," he is continually reaching for Eden. The first allusion to Eden comes in connection with one of the Germans who capture Billy and Weary. The corporal, whose legs are "thrust into golden cavalry boots which he had taken from a dead Hungarian colonel on the Russian front" (*SF* 53), tells a recruit that if he looks into the shine on the boots deeply enough, he will see Adam and Eve. Billy, Vonnegut tells us, "stared into the patina of the

corporal's boots, saw Adam and Eve in the golden depths. They were naked. They were so innocent . . . so eager to behave decently. Billy Pilgrim loved them" (53). This allusion connects to Billy's first physical encounter with Eden. "Next to the golden boots," Vonnegut writes, "were a pair of feet which were swaddled in rags . . . Billy looked up at the face that went with the [feet]. It was the face of a blond angel, of a fifteen year-old boy. The boy was as beautiful as Eve" (53). Billy identifies innocence with Adam and Eve, and seeing the "lovely boy, the heavenly androgyny" (53) gives Billy a renewed hope; it allows him to escape his doubt (Reed 15).

The one Edenic scene within *Slaughterhouse-Five* that is truly identifiable as only a dream occurs just after Billy's internment in a prison camp. Sickened from lack of food, Billy is placed in a hospital and given morphine. The dream he has is of a paradise; however, Billy is not an Adam in this instance:

> Under morphine, Billy had a dream of giraffes in a garden. The giraffes were following gravel paths, were pausing to munch sugar pears from treetops. Billy was a giraffe; too [. . .] The giraffes accepted Billy as one of their own, as a harmless creature as preposterously specialized as themselves (*SF* 99).

This is the Edenic dream that refers directly to Billy's isolation. He cannot identify with humanity, which, as he has seen, is cruel; instead, he identifies with innocent giraffes, peaceful, vegetarian creatures with a purpose other than destruction. The two most significant Edenic episodes in *Slaughterhouse-Five* relate to the aliens from Tralfamadore, from whom Billy learns the nature of time and death. On the night Billy is taken to Tralfamadore, he cannot sleep, because due to the nature of his relationship with time, Billy knows that he is about to be kidnapped. He goes downstairs and turns on the television. When he turns on the television, Billy becomes "slightly unstuck in time" (*SF* 73). Vonnegut then describes Billy's perception of a war movie in reverse: he watches as German planes suck bullets from American planes, which then "exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes" (*SF* 74). The bombs are taken to America, "where factories were . . . dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals" (74). This pacifist reversal, however, is incomplete. The most meaningful section of the movie, to Billy, was not on the screen: The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve (75). A simple reversal of war, of the ultimate fall of humanity, from cruelty to innocence, causes Billy to mentally extrapolate back to the most innocent of the species (Mustazza 105).

Following the war movie, aliens from Tralfamadore kidnap Billy, and create perhaps the most literal incarnation of Eden in modern literature, the only point at which Billy is truly happy. Vonnegut summarizes Billy's experience early in the novel: "He was taken to Tralfamadore, where he was displayed naked in a zoo . . . He was mated there with a former Earthling movie star named Montana Wildhack" (*SF* 25). The habitat is an obvious Eden, an environment created by a superior intelligence in which all material needs are met. Billy and Montana, as Adam and Eve, are nude, and feel no shame in being so, because "most Tralfamadorians had no way of knowing [if they] were not beautiful" (113). They are also the sole members of mankind on that world; therefore, they become the progenitors of humanity, insofar as it exists on Tralfamadore.

Billy Pilgrim must grow to understand the results of societal deception: death and war. Every episode in the novel has a reference point – forward or backward – in Dresden. The

bombing is the ultimate betrayal of Billy's innocence by postlapsarian humanity: the landscape becomes a literal and symbolic hell. While Billy and his fellow prisoners hide below, Allied planes incinerate the entire city: There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. Vonnegut's refrain, "so it goes," is one aspect of the novel that some critics say mocks morality: they claim that it makes death a meaningless occurrence. Death is a pivotal idea in modern life, a central point in news, pervasive and unavoidable (Hassan 6).

As a modern *bildungsroman*, the novel uses death as the fulcrum about which Billy Pilgrim's Adamic initiatory rite revolves. "So it goes" becomes a mantra uttered whenever any death, large or small, takes place. It is a corrective used to construct the unjustifiable as bearable and inevitable: it appears exactly one hundred times within the course of the narrative, not to make it meaningless, but rather to impart the same meaning to all deaths, whether they are of lice or of one hundred thirty five thousand innocent civilians (Klinkowitz 87). While historically, death has pervaded society, with the advent of modern military technology, the scale becomes so great that such numbers become meaningless: the refrain is a commentary on our disregard of death, and by calling attention to our apathy; Vonnegut seeks to heighten our awareness. Death is as egalitarian as the democratic values espoused by Americans. "So it goes" has another purpose, one referring specifically to Eden. Such a phrase denies mortality. Billy, speaking to a large crowd on the night of his death, tells them, "It is time for me to be dead for a little while – and then live again" (*SF* 142-3).

While many critics of *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempt to identify Billy as Everyman, he is a modern Everyman's antithesis. Billy is, in all senses, an Adamic literary figure. He is isolated, in all senses of the word. He becomes the embodiment of prelapsarian man – in this sense, he is the Everyman of a prelapsarian ideal, of an egalitarian innocence prior to the society in which he lives. Billy does not, as Robert Merrill suggests, call for us to believe "with the Pilgrims, that there is nothing to be done about life's injustices" (177), recalling a Calvinistic view of predestination. Rather, Billy presents a plea for responsibility, for the pursuit of prelapsarian grace not as a lost ideal but as a reachable state of innocence.

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