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Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: From Fact to Fiction

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Abstract:

Kurt Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the late 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam War. Two decades after his own horrifying experiences as a POW in the Second World War, he resolves to pen a record of his wartime memories in Dresden, Germany together with an old war companion. Admitting that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre,” Vonnegut comes up with a set of strategies as to create a novel piece of war literature, rather than merely a narration of assault and carnage. These strategies basically include the use of fictional characters, notable among whom Billy Pilgrim; comic narrative voice and anti-heroes; presentation of war as an event devoid of any glory or elegance; and disarrangement of the chronological order of life.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut; *Slaughterhouse-Five*; fictional characters; black humor; anti-war-glamorization; time fragmentation.

Introduction

Known as one of the most impressive novels of the twentieth-century America, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* wins an influential status in the postmodern literary canon. Diwany asserts that through *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut reconstructs history by bringing to light the minor events that took place in mid-twentieth century world (84). This postmodern masterpiece was published in 1969, in the thick of the Vietnam War, and depicts the atrocities of the Second World War with a heart-breaking wit. Readers of Vonnegut's work face a universe devoid of meaning, purpose, and such concepts as free will (Westerblom 2).

Diwany attributes this sense of meaninglessness to “postmodern wasteland,” explaining that in this newly-established desolation man’s path ends in nothingness and anarchy (87). As a postmodern novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* illustrates the end of the world, a world devoid of any purpose or significance, and the state of its decay and destruction. Diwany associates “countless sufferings, deaths and moral decay” to the world Vonnegut portrays in his Dresden novel (90). According to Simpson, Vonnegut opens his readers’ eyes to perceive human situation “in a chaotic, often absurd, and irrational universe” (262).

Published about two decades and a half after the end of the Second World War, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is furnished with the theme of war as a literary device (Simmons xii). Known as a Dresden book, *Slaughterhouse-Five* portrays Vonnegut’s experiences and memories of war in Dresden, Germany.¹ Twenty four years after World War II, Vonnegut looks back wholeheartedly at the Allied Firebombing of Dresden in 1945, although he admits that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre”² (Vonnegut 13). For all that, he blends fact and fiction, tragedy and comedy so brilliantly that his work turns into a significant literary document highlighting the ideologies and politics underlying nations in giving rise to atrocities of wars (Diwany 82). According to Diwany, “*Slaughterhouse-Five* [sic] is a magnification of the escalating inhuman cruelty that has spread in postwar western societies, and the moral vacuum characterizing contemporary life” (83).

This article studies *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a narrative providing authentic historical reports of war. As a former prisoner of war, Vonnegut attempts to furnish the subtle reader with the opportunity to imagine what it feels to witness a massacre. However, in order to soothe himself out of the state of shock he is afflicted with, Vonnegut devises a set of techniques to write a fiction rather than a stultifying testimony to carnage.

Literature Review

Since its publication, a vast area of research has been conducted on Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Studies carried out in recent years, particularly from 2000 onward, encompass a plethora of views on the novel, including its genre, structure, and postmodern features, to name but a few.

To begin with, Josh Simpson in his 2004 article considers Vonnegut’s Troutean trilogy, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; *Slaughterhouse-Five*; and *Breakfast of Champions*, which focus upon science fiction novels of Kilgore Trout. Through this aspect of the novel, Vonnegut aims at forewarning the hazards of fake realities that evoke unfounded hopes; hazards that, according to Simpson, pervert the realities of Vonnegut’s heroes.

As a case in point, Jennifer Moody in her article published in 2009 brings to light the structural elements that render Vonnegut’s masterpiece a postmodern work. Moody manages to depict the absurdity and chaos underlying the story by highlighting both the framework and content of the novel. Notable among these features are concise paragraphing as well as vulnerable, dislikable characters.

The last but not least, Diwany in an article presented in 2014 focuses on the ontological uncertainty that plagues Billy Pilgrim throughout the novel. This paper portrays Billy as a typical postmodern man who feels responsible for the sin Adam and Eve committed. That marks the reason, based on Diwany's argument, why Billy chooses Tralfamadore as his own version of regained paradise.

Approaching Vonnegut's bestseller from a hybrid of fictional and historical perspectives, the present article studies *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a narrative providing authentic historical reports of war. As a former prisoner of war, Vonnegut attempts to furnish the subtle reader with the opportunity to imagine what it feels to witness a massacre. However, in order to soothe himself out of the state of shock he is afflicted with, Vonnegut devises a set of techniques to write a fiction rather than a stultifying testimony to carnage.

1. Psychic Revival

As Eliot Rosewater – one of Vonnegut's characters in the novel – claims, fiction provides postmodern individuals with a chance to “reinvent themselves and their universe” (Vonnegut 50); thus, the privilege to make significance out of sheer absurdity and meaninglessness. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a work in which Vonnegut looks back at great destruction, not only of the German city of Dresden, but of his own psyche. Vonnegut has personified himself in the fictional character Billy Pilgrim and depicts his own terrors and anxieties in the way Billy speaks and acts in the novel. In a word, except for the time-traveling, and some other fictional characters Billy encounters through the course of the work, the whole novel is an autobiography of Vonnegut himself³ (Moody 79).

Farrell relates Vonnegut's objectives of writing a novel (fiction) concerning an authentic historical disaster, rather than simply preparing some historical reports on the event: “He [Vonnegut] must turn to literature as a way to express his moral outrage as well as the empathy he feels for his fellow human beings, emotions that have no room in straightforward news stories” (Farrell 7). As mentioned above, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an autobiography of Vonnegut himself, his horrifying experiences in the Allied Firebombing of Dresden, and the suffering of his fellow human beings through the course of the Second World War. Vonnegut attempts to escape the traumatization of his war experiences by creating fictional characters, like Billy Pilgrim, who in their own turn escape the events in the novel by resorting to fantasy.⁴ Farrell believes that according to critics, Billy's Tralfamadorian kidnapping serves as a dreamy getaway he devises to create distance between himself and the catastrophic traumas of his lifetime (354-55).

Novels of Kilgore Trout which serve as a substantial element of science fiction in the text provide another ground for Eliot Rosewater and Billy to restore their lost selves: “Kilgore Trout's novels, of which Rosewater has an extensive collection, are the tools with which Billy constructs his new, postwar reality” (Simpson 266).

Critic Josh Simpson speaks of the two superficial and profound layers of Vonnegut's novel as:

. . . although *Slaughterhouse-Five* on the surface is Vonnegut's Dresden novel, on a much deeper level it is also the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man so tormented and haunted by the burden of the past that he finds it necessary to 'reinvent' his own reality. (266)

2. Armor of Humor

Although this postmodern American writer portrays authentic events and their aftermaths at the heart of his novels, he illuminates his works with rays of solace toward modern life. As such, satire and black humor serve as two techniques that provide Vonnegut with the competence to approach the harsh moments of life with laughter. In fact, as Farrell points out:

Underlying his jokes, [and] humorous drawings . . . Vonnegut expresses social criticism about the suffering and atrocities human beings experienced in the 20th century – from the effects of war and atomic weaponry, to racism, social injustice, and environmental destruction. (3)

As such, Vonnegut laughs at the absurdity of the universe in his fictions by employing the technique of black humor. The most prolific period of Vonnegut's writing career, the 1960s, is characterized with the advent of this style. Writers such as Roald Dahl, John Barth, Joseph Heller, and Vonnegut himself were among the leaders of this fictional form, creating humorous but heart-rending works as *My Uncle Oswald* (1979), *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Catch-22* (1961), and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Josh Simpson introduces Vonnegut's writing style as containing "irony, satire, and black humor" with which the novelist challenges the despondency of twentieth century and demonstrates what humanity signifies in a chaotic preposterous universe (262).⁵

Through fictional and comic characters, Vonnegut finds the ability to better portray the absurdity of the modern world in general, and the atrocities of the twentieth century in particular. The sense of the absurd, Martino asserts, underlies the Camusian anti-hero: "Camus describes the feeling of the absurd as the distance between man's desire for meaning and the absence of it in the universe . . ." (Martino 5-6). As a novelist born and brought up at wartime, Vonnegut contextualizes his fiction both temporally and spatially, and portrays the values and concerns of the era. However, he does not approach the atrocities and catastrophes of his age with a dismal and cynical glance; rather, he employs sense of humor, jokes, cartoonish characters, and clumsy anti-heroes as elements that render his fictions light-hearted and give variety to the dull pace of history.

3. An Anti-War Move

Vonnegut's novel reconstructs history by uncovering the minor and unheard stories blurred by those who have written history of the time, and thus deconstructing the traditional

war-glamorizing form of the American novels. Just as Vonnegut promises Mary O'Hare that he would not write a war-romanticizing type of novel, he dismisses conventional fashion of describing war and deflates "the romance and glamour often associated with war narratives" (Farrell 352).⁶ Works that are recorded and presented by historical dominators falsify self-consciously the real stories, while giving twists to the reality and fallacy of the authentic historical events of their own time. Vonnegut, thus, brings into existence a work that renders a true picture of the brutalities of the twentieth-century man in addition to the absurdity underlying the rulers' intentions in setting in motion the battles. Vonnegut promises Mary O'Hare: "If I ever do finish it [the novel], though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne" (Vonnegut 11).

In addition, even the notion of free will, which is believed by Tralfamodrians to exist only on Earth, is regarded as the prime reason why wars and their atrocities are launched. On that account, Vonnegut unveils the authentic nature of free will, contradicting the long-held historical view that man's will is potent enough to prevent disasters.

4. Back and Forth in Time

Time is one of the distressing factors that draws Billy, and thus Vonnegut, even closer back to the traumatic memories of war and its horrible aftermaths. For Vonnegut, time moves toward destruction and death; therefore, both the fictional character Billy and the real Vonnegut endeavor to escape time. Billy does so by time-traveling as well as escaping into the distant imaginative planet Tralfamadore, while Vonnegut achieves such an aim by creating an anti-war fiction. Taking distance from traditional war narrative, not only does Vonnegut sabotage the conventional manner of characterization of combat novels, he dismisses the traditional chronological order of such novels, as well.

The chronological disruption of the plot renders a nonlinear narrative, a random collage of temporally-circular events. As Farrell points out, "one of the reasons Vonnegut disrupts linear time in the novel is because, in his experience, time moves toward destruction . . ." (353). Hence, Vonnegut's inclination toward circularity of time disturbs the steady pace of it.⁷

A second reason underlying the use of time fragmentation technique by Vonnegut has its centrality in the terrifying moment of bombardment. The Allied Firebombing of Dresden with more than 135,000 casualties has left such a devastating impact on Vonnegut that he devises the non-linear structure to "keep the . . . event . . . fresh in the reader's mind" (Diwany 87). By moving back and forth in time, a given scene is replayed a plethora of times, resulting in reverberation of the moment of bombardment.

Conclusion

As a final point, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be unquestionably considered as a historical document revealing the chaos and ferocity that World War II generated. This postmodern

novel, however, differs from other factual records in that it adopts a set of techniques to make the reader visualize how it feels to actually stand on and witness a battlefield. Through this work, Vonnegut grabs the opportunity to portray his own life as a former prisoner of war and reconstruct the absurdity prevailing the 20th-century universe. Vonnegut's authentic experiences of massacre, assault, and imprisonment compel him neither to romanticize battle nor to overvalue man's power of free will to prevent bloodshed. In contrast, through humor, he criticizes the nations' intentions in launching wars as well as the brutalities they give rise to. Clumsy anti-heroes, comic drawings, and the satiric tone all account for the social injustice he observes at the heart of war. Time fragmentation forms another abyss that creates distance between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and historical war documents. In order to deglamorize war, Vonnegut must remind the reader of the onslaught at all times during the novel. This he achieves by flying in time nonlinearly.

Notes:

1. In 1942, Vonnegut volunteered to go to war and came back home two years later, finding out "that his mother had committed suicide" by an overdose of sleeping pills the night before his arrival (Westerblom 1). In December 1944 he was captured as POW (prisoner of war) by the German army at the Battle of the Bulge. Battle of the Bulge "was the largest American defeat in the second world war" (Diwany 83) and "the last main German offensive of World War II" (Farrell 6). Dresden was the city where he spent the rest of the war in and where he witnessed the most horrible brutalities of military forces against the civilians.
2. 135,000 people were killed in the Allied Bombardment of Dresden; the number of the dead by far two times more than that in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Historical studies demonstrate that destruction of Dresden is the largest genocide in European history (Diwany 2014).
3. For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Farrell (2008).
4. The depressive mode plaguing Vonnegut for years drove him toward the path of literature and writing. Farrell explains that Vonnegut turned to literature so as to convey his fury and grief.
5. The authentic context of Vonnegut's novels gives credit to his belief that a writer should be in service of his society and bring about change. In an interview with the American magazine *Playboy*, he remarks:

My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to how writers should serve. Mainly, I think they should be – and biologically have to be – agents of change. For the better, we hope. (qtd. In Simmons 4).
6. Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism; History, Theory, Fiction* (1998) notes: "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 11).
7. For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Martino (2010).

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