

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-II April 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

DR. VISHWANATH BITE

Editor-In-Chief

DR. MADHURI BITE

Managing Editor

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Vision and Fictional Dimensions of Kurt Vonnegut: An Assessment

**Dr. Bipin Bihari Dash**

Assistant Professor in English,  
Odisha University of Technology and Research,  
(Formerly CET, Bhubaneswar)

**Article History:** Submitted-04/03/2023, Revised-21/04/2023, Accepted-22/04/2023, Published-30/04/2023.

### **Abstract:**

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. is one of the versatile novelists of the twentieth century. He is deeply influenced by the middle-class social milieu, the horrors of World War II, the impact of the Great Depression and the Industrial Revolution of the early twentieth century. Vonnegut started writing literary supplements for different magazines which later culminated in novel writing. In all his novels we find both the fantastic variety and the underlying coherence of the world of Vonnegut's imagination. American fiction in the 1960s and 1970s was not only exciting and abundant but underwent some fundamental transformation of theme and style. His fiction of the sixties is the popular artefact which may be the finest example of American cultural change. This paper attempts to explore the vision and fictional dimensions of Kurt Vonnegut.

**Keywords:** Cultural Ethos, Bokonomism, Tralfamadorians, Dehumanisation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kurt Vonnegut's rise to eminence and recognition as a major writer of fiction came about in 1969, when *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published to great acclaim. In this novel, he experimented with a new technique which marks a major shift in his fiction of the 70's. This is called as Vonnegut's "leap within"- that is, his entering into his fictional universe. This shift is significant and cannot be treated merely as the prerogative of a celebrated author. It is a fictional technique of wide-ranging implications and one of the major strategies in modern European fiction. This paper examines the effect this shift has on Vonnegut's style and vision by first taking a quick glance at his fiction of the 60's and then tracing the course of this shift from *Slaughterhouse-Five* to *Slapstick*. Since Vonnegut has frequently been described as some kind of a cultural "guru," the paper also attempts, very briefly though, to see in what way his fiction reverberates and oscillates the cultural ethos of the two decades.

Many critics and scholars differ widely in their estimation and evaluation of Vonnegut's work in the 60's before *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While some disparage him as a writer of opiate fiction, others put him in the top berth of radical innovators. These are extremist positions. Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965), in spite of differences in their narrative style, are similar in purpose. Both are satires and as such they exemplify Vonnegut's concern with the culture of America; both indict some of its repellent aspects.

*Cat's Cradle* dramatizes the apocalyptic doom caused by irresponsible scientists, such as Dr Hoenikker; he is a grotesque caricature of a scientist who is so over-specialized that he has become amoral and therefore dangerous. Through the use of demonic imagery and by making him the first casualty of his own invention, Vonnegut offers a variation on the Frankenstein myth. Although the scion of a family which prided itself on its enthusiasm for science, he admitted that he was sickened by the use of technology that I had such great hopes for. Vonnegut also satirizes Bokononism by basing it and its serious-looking messages on borrowings from mass culture. Vonnegut looks upon Bokononism as a politically-expedient religion which is offered as merchandise, though its founders make it into a myth, as colonizers in the past created the myth of the White Man's burden. This is a religion secretly practiced by the people of San Lonzonzo, the supreme religious act of which consists of any two worshippers rubbing the bare soles of their feet together to inspire spiritual connection.

In *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* Vonnegut is more direct in his denunciation of the material culture of America and exposure of the trivial surface of American life. Following its publication Vonnegut was dubbed the writer as culture hero. It is significant to note that the general mood of the 1960's was one of protest against dehumanization, military control, political lying, and power madness, then Vonnegut is certainly one of its spokesmen. In fact, Benjamin DeMott has shown how his books are representative of the ideas and beliefs of the revolting youth of the decade. Eliot Rosewater projects the role of a writer and dismisses those who evade getting involved with social and cultural issues as talented sparrow farts who write delicately. Vonnegut has stated that the writers are the most important members of our society and not just potentially but actually. Good writers must have and stand by their own ideas. He exposes the hollowness of American myths and the inhumanity of the American social patterns, mostly through Eliot Rosewater und Kilgore Trout. Eliot also radiates the norms of compassion and love; "I'm going to love these discarded Americans,

even though they're useless and unattractive - that is going to be my work of art" (*God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* 47).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is a pivotal text in Vonnegut's canon for various reasons. It is a highly self-conscious work, builds within it, its own aesthete parameters and places Vonnegut in the category of radical innovators. These facts have to be borne in mind while evaluating its depth, power, and value. The novel also marks a shift in Vonnegut's narrative style: he leaps "into" his work. Such a leap, David Lodge is an English author and critic who states us that it is all the harder to identify the implied author's attitudes and values. Perhaps this is why the responses to the novel have varied from downright condemnation to lyrical eulogy.

At the outset of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the principal character is Vonnegut himself; he talks to us intimately, talking to us into his confidence. He tells us about the problems he had to face and the struggle he had to go through to bring it to life. He also clarifies the intention of the novel. We learn that he is compelled to write in the first-person authorial voice because of his search for an appropriate medium to write about a massacre. It calls for a new mode; the holocaust requires a new projection. He tells his publisher that "it is so short and jumbled and jangled" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 17) and a mixture of what happened and what did not happen. In sum, Vonnegut prepares us for a work which is different from his earlier ones-formally as well as thematically. He also clarifies, through his assurances to the wife of his friend, that his account of the War would not be glamorous; it would be a war fought by children.

It is difficult to guess what Vonnegut's novel would have been like if he had succeeded in writing it as early as he wanted but the fact that he was writing it in the 60's certainly impinges upon his attitude towards the War. In 1945, people who returned from the War were satisfied with what they had done; they would boast of their performance, as "The Three Musketeers" in *Slaughterhouse-Five* pitifully imagine they would have done but in the 60's War became identified with the Vietnam experience. In fact, for Vonnegut the Dresden experience seems to have become coterminous with that of Vietnam which is brought into the novel throughout by means of direct reference to facts and figures of war dead, through the bellicose general who speaks at Billy's Lions Club and in a number of narrative incidents, as when Billy treats a boy whose father has been killed in the battle for Hill 875 near Dakto.

Vonnegut's satirical attitude towards the War, which is clearly suggested by the subtitle of the novel "*The Children's Crusade*" and the series of clarifications he offers to us in chapter one, governs his choice of Billy Pilgrim as his protagonist. To participate in a war

which is fought by children he has to be a child-innocent, naive, and passive. Vonnegut gives him a very limited power of action, which is subtly suggested in the following lines: "There are almost no characters in this story and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces" (140). Having no knowledge about how to face the world under the grip of war, Billy functions like a Charlie Chaplin character let off in a world of pain and suffering and are totally under the manipulative control of the author. Campbell's humorous remark that he is a non-person characterizes him aptly. In the words of the narrator: "Billy is spastic in time, he has no control over where he is going next and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (20).

Another significant thing about Billy is that he is unbelievably passive. He is pushed, prodded, beaten, kicked, bullied and threatened by everybody and yet he moves on without complaint. He has miraculous escapes. He looks young and old at the same time. He is, in short, a grotesque creation:

Billy was preposterous – six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. On his feet were cheap, low-cut civilian shoes which he had bought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down....

Billy was wearing a thin field jacket, a shirt and trousers of scratchy wool... He was the only one of the four who had a beard. It was a random, bristly beard and some of the bristles were white, even though Billy was only twenty-one years old. He was also going bald....

He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo (28-29).

There is a continuous play in the novel on Billy's grotesqueness. Such a persona enables Vonnegut to see and thereby render for the readers the grotesqueness of war: its filthy, dehumanizing aspects. These are reinforced by Vonnegut's use of demonic imagery-elaborate descriptions of the varied instruments of torture - scenes of brutality, scatological

descriptions and the persistent "so it goes". Those critics who look upon Billy as a character drawn in the manner of psychological realism misread the intention of the book.

Such a misreading is perhaps due to the fact that Vonnegut gives Billy a presentable shape as an optometrist; he looks like a dignified social being - rich, married and with children. In this role he is virtually another person. This holding of the two persons in one, in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner as the subtitle clarifies, is made possible through his time-warp: he can blink in and out of years and therefore in and out of scenes. Many of these scenes are Billy's excursions into outer space, where he is vocal and active and very different from what he is in the war. Such scenes provide fun. In fact, the fantastic trips build a fairy tale atmosphere which is carried into the house of Billy. In the kitchen of his home, we find a bottle, which has a label "Drink me," as in *Alice in Wonderland*. His adventures with Mona Wildhack and the glee with which Tralfamadorians watch the two are extremely diverting. But these also add to the grimness of the War. The narrative line of the novel, which cuts across the barriers of time and space, builds a promiscuous intermixture of the scenes of War and of science fantasy and heightens the effect of War as a bad dream. Vonnegut uses the science fantasy also to reinforce his satirical thrust by making it clear that even Tralfamadorians wage wars.

After chapter one, Vonnegut employs a narrator to give Billy's story, but, in between, perhaps not trusting the narrative voice, he comes inside the novel to speak in his own voice. Consider, for example, these two passages:

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains.

"That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (109).

Somebody behind him in the box car said, "Oz." That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana (129).

These intrusions neither surprised nor jar the reader; on the contrary, they lend credibility to Vonnegut's assertion that his experience of the War was that of a lived nightmare. His leapfrogging is indicative of his passionate urgency. After Billy is through with his work, Vonnegut returns into the book to take up the narration in his own voice, in which catalogues of death and killings add to the horrifying details of the War.

In this way, through the person of Billy, through the careful control of the narrative voice, and through his personal appearance at the beginning, in the middle, and then at the end, Vonnegut succeeds in making *Slaughterhouse-Five* a devastating critique of war and war-mongering and forces the readers to move into what Bellow calls "contemplative states". Vonnegut's leapfrogging has been eminently successful.

The chilling effect of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is in strong contrast to the loudness and gusto of *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). The experiment which Vonnegut started in the former is carried to its farthest limits in the latter. He writes the preface of the book, at the behest of a friend under an assumed name, narrates the entire happenings in the book in his own voice, midway steps into the action of the book as a character-complicating it a great deal by reminding us off and on that the rest of the characters in the novel are his creations - and in the end, like Prospero, releases some of his dutiful servants from the confines of his fictional world.

In this rhetorical game, Vonnegut transforms his so-called novel into an entirely different kind of fiction, which absorbs into itself a seemingly bewildering variety of scenes and episodes, narrative bits, dramas within dramas and a fairly good number of sketches and slogans. In terms of its formal features it comes nearest to the anatomy of the Menippean type and a loosely-shaped confession. It has a minimal plot of the traditional kind and literally hangs together by a shoelace - the whole movement of the novel is the encounter between the Pontiac dealer Dwayne Hoover and the science fictionist Kilgore Trout which ends in a frightful scene of violence. Within the ambit of this tenuous narrative frame, we get many complicated subplots, some of which span only a few lines.

Exercising his authorial voice a little too aggressively, Vonnegut says: he is going to be "impolite"; he is going to "perform childishly"; he is searching for "a culture," without throwing away "sacred things", which he has shored from his past. He also wants that we hear him. "Listen" is virtually transformed into a rhetorical trope. He becomes his own satiric voice and dispenses with a persona. He speaks plainly and brutally about the things he disapproves of. As his own persona, he also becomes the repository of norms. He literally transforms himself into his own rhetoric.

To realize his objective, Vonnegut acts as a showman and very flagrantly cuts through the barriers of art, as it were, to evolve a new mode of communication. He sets aside the conventional story-telling of Beatrice Keedsler because she made people believe that "life had leading characters, significant details ... and a beginning, middle, and an end" (209). He thinks that America, has become a prototype of such art: Americans "shoot each other so

often: it was a convenient literary device for ending short stories and books" (210). Elaborating on this, he further says: "Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life... Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done" (210).

All these statements are revolutionary in their import. Vonnegut pleads for a new kind of a role for the writer, which is to break through the smug exterior of things. To do so he pleads for doing away with all forms of conventional art which do not perform such a function. At the same time, in the context of the action of the novel his statements build a strident satirical persona, almost like one in the formal verse of the Roman satirists - an angry, irascible person who pours forth his denunciations in bitterest possible words. We get a taste of this in the repulsive cultural smorgasbord which is the main fare for the breakfast of the readers. Vonnegut launches a devastating satire on American institutions and the quality of life of its people. The American national anthem is characterized as "balderdash"; the early settlers turn from the Pilgrim Fathers into "sea pirates"; human beings metamorphose into Heliogabalus. The catalogue of denunciations is too large; through these Vonnegut builds the vision of a totally dehumanized community. Human beings as machines are propelled into action by bad chemicals: "... the people in a country called Germany were so full of bad chemicals for a while that they actually built factories whose only purpose was to kill people by the millions" (133).

However, an element of tension is built into the novel when Kilgore Trout tells Dwyane Hoover that he had bad chemicals probably because he was a programmed machine. To demolish this idea Vonnegut comes in person to provide what he calls the spiritual climax of the novel. Being a master showman, he does not deliver the message himself. It is suggested first visually and metaphorically through the painting of Rabo Karabekian, who later puts it in these words: "I now give you my word of honour ... that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters... It is a picture of the awareness of every animal ... the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. "It is all that is alive in any of us" (221).

For the first time Vonnegut pleads for our need to realize what we have made of ourselves and of our life and then to come to terms with our situation. In his posturing one also notices a perceptible shift from his public self to his private self. The public self, which is at the core of his satire, is taken over towards the end of the novel by his private self. In

fact, by extending his personality into various characters, he is having a loud debate with himself. This shift anticipates the mood of the last novel discussed in this paper.

*Slapstick* (1976) is largely a continuation of Vonnegut's style in *Breakfast*, but there are some variations as well. In *Breakfast* the action is mainly in the time present; the landscape is familiar, although strewn with bits and parts of Trout's scientific fantasies. In *Slapstick*, after the opening chapter, which is avowedly autobiographical, Vonnegut casts the narrative in the shape of a monstrous fable and later on shifts into a projected future where the landscape is dismal and bleak and the protagonist is trying to salvage it with saving graces. Notwithstanding his pronouncements in *Breakfast*, it also has a marked and an elaborate story-line. The narrative is like a modern-day confession: Dr. Swain is writing his autobiography and since he dies before it gets completed, Vonnegut closes it with an epilogue in his own voice - but the transitions from the prologue to the narrative proper and then to the epilogue are hardly felt. If we feel any difference at all between these various sections, it is because the narrative proper has the tonality of a romance.

The whole idea of the novel, Vonnegut tells us in the prologue, occurred to him when he and his elder brother were on the plane to attend the funeral of their uncle. The prologue is in itself an engaging piece of writing and offers us very small portraits of some of his relatives. It also clarifies the author's intention. In a mood of reminiscence the plane trip reminds him of his dead sister, who became a victim to cancer at a young age. He also broods for a while on his recently-expired uncle who joined the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous, although he was not a teetotaler because he wanted to get over his feeling of loneliness. It also reminds him of his own aging - physical as well as mental. In his own words, "his novel is about desolated cities and spiritual cannibalism and incest and loneliness and lovelessness and death" (18-19).

The first part of *Slapstick* is a brilliantly contrived tale: it has movement, surprise and strong allegorical undertones. Swain and his sister are born as 'neanderthaloids'. We had the features of adult, fossil human beings even in infancy - massive foreheads, and steam shovel jaws. Their parents shut them in a well-provided house. They constituted a single genius, which is a sort of intellectual hermaphrodites. Their story goes through several turns and moves into its most bizarre phase when, after a long spell of separation, they reunite temporarily in an orgy which lasts for five days and nights and between them they write a "manual on childbearing". Through this tale, Vonnegut explores the theme of child-parent

relationship in all its varied nuances but the overpowering seductiveness of the tale has made many reviewers miss its serious aspect.

The death of Swain's sister coincides with some kind of a jolt in gravity, causing almost a mini-apocalypse: "elevator cables were snapping, airplanes were crashing, ships were sinking, motor vehicles were breaking their axles and bridges were collapsing"(153). This changed landscape in which New York turns into a jungle of junk, provides the setting for Swain's presidency of the United States, which degenerates into a kind of an appendage because his only subjects are his granddaughter, her lover, and a neighbour a few miles away. However, the narrative, which often tends to become dull, yields one significant idea: Swain's solution to the problem of loneliness, which he regards as the main problem of the Americans. The damaging excesses of Americans in the past were motivated by loneliness rather than a fondness for sin, he claims. The solution is extended families: joining people through their new middle names, "which would consist of a noun, the name of a flower or fruit or nut or vegetable or legume, or a bird or a reptile or a fish, or a mollusc or a gem or a mineral or a chemical element - connected by a hyphen to a number between one and twenty" (162).

*Slapstick*, both in terms of the subdued manner in which it is narrated and the themes with which it is concerned, is the least radical but the most personal of Vonnegut's works. His sitting presence in the novel offers neither the fictional fireworks found in *Breakfast of Champions*, nor an aggressive stance towards the society or culture of his day but only a few dim rumblings. Vonnegut is, in fact, creating a fiction of inwardness, getting more private, though not totally withdrawing himself from his involvement with public affairs. His leap inward is, therefore, not merely a technical device which gives a radical orientation to the form of his novels; it gradually becomes indicative of a change in his attitudes as well, in his priorities and concerns. He is using fiction to come to terms with himself. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he is wrestling with his memory; in *Breakfast of Champions* he is searching for something sacred - a spiritual message; in *Slapstick* he is searching for the lost paradise of his childhood and dreaming of a future in which he fights his loneliness in the comfort of large families. It seems to me that Vonnegut's leap inward has also a cultural dimension to it, because in his moving away from public concerns to private ones, he virtually exemplifies the mood of Richard Sennett's *The Fall of the Public Man*, which postulates the "localizing of human experience" and what in the 1970's came to be known as the "culture of narcissism."

## CONCLUSION

The unique literary background of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the circumstances of his life led him through all the movements and influences of his age. He pursued a lifelong devotion to the fictional art. His strong grasp of the post-modernist society made him a part that entire he saw and experienced. He continued to evolve his creative art of fiction to mirror every fresh experience – physical, psychological, socio-political, and technological. That was the secret of his success as a novelist. Whether it is fantasy, black humour, mythic vision, elements of science fiction, and horror of war, schizophrenic treatment or the absurdity of life – all these are compatible in his creative mind and are the main ingredients of his novels.

### Works Cited:

Abrahams, William Rodney. *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

Broer, Lawrence R. *Schizophezenia in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Tusculumbia: University of Alabama Press, 1994.

Rozak, Theodore. *The Making of Counterculture*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of the Public Man*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Singh, Sukbir. *The Survivor in Contemporary American Fiction*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1991.

Spinrad, Norman. Ed. *Modern Science Fiction*. New York: Anchor, 1981.

Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Delacorte Press; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Slapstick*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Holt Rinehart and London, Gollanz, 1963; rpt. London: Penguin, 1965.