

A Carnavalesque Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the carnivalesque elements in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. The novel, based on Kurt Vonnegut's own experience in World War II, is an eye-witness account of a prisoner who survives the Allied forces firebombing of Dresden. Vonnegut has said that he always intended to write about the experience but found himself incapable of doing so for more than twenty years. *Slaughterhouse Five*, as a final product of Vonnegut's twenty years of hardship, becomes his most famous and widely studied work. Its style puts the reader in a thought-experiment where the novel can be perceived as an imaginary space where contradicting notions exist. The novel is unconventional in the sense that it has no beginning, middle or end - neither in terms of chronological time-scheme nor of plot development. There is also no suspense and none of the cause and effect relationships that one finds in realistic fiction. Vonnegut's pictures debunk the glorification of the advertised image through an act of degradation, an important aspect of the carnival. Vonnegut employs parody to highlight the shortfalls of man's ideology. This paradox of degradation centralizes in all works of parody, since parody attempts to rethink, redesign, and improve fixed conventions.

Keywords: war, parody, metaphor, degradation, grotesque.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-2007) was born to a descendant of a prominent German-American family. His father was an architect and his mother was a noted beauty. Both spoke German fluently but declined to teach Kurt the language in light of widespread anti-German sentiment following World War I. In 1943 Vonnegut enlisted himself in the U.S. Army and took part in the Battle of the Bulge, Belgium, where he was captured by the Germans as a Prisoner of War (POW). Though he has German roots, he was forced to work at a factory in the city of Dresden. On February 13, 1945, when Dresden was firebombed, Vonnegut and the other POWs survived because they were in a meat locker of a slaughterhouse. The scene of senseless misery and mass destruction at Dresden played a key role in Vonnegut's development of pacifist views and his experiences as a soldier had a profound impact on his writings which reflect the helpless human condition through which he emphasizes the role of chance in human actions. All of his fourteen novels are filled with topsy-turvy, carnivalesque images and races of his own invention.

The main concern of Vonnegut's novels is to attack a set of beliefs that men surrender themselves to, thereby, causing misery to themselves. The significance man attaches to artificial constructs like race, nationality, even national dogma, forces man to snap the common thread that links all people. For a broader readership who felt conventional fiction was

inadequate to express the way in which the common man's life had been disrupted by radical social changes of the postwar era, Vonnegut wrote novels structured in more pertinently contemporary terms, bereft of such unifying devices as conclusive characterization or chronologically organized plots. As a counterculture hero of the turbulent 1960's and a best-selling author among readers of popular fiction (in the three decades after), Kurt Vonnegut is at once more traditional and more complicated than his enthusiasts might like to believe.

This paper offers a carnivalesque interpretation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* which deal with war and the consequent human degradation. The novel has a story-writer and a narrator as characters and also has a subtitle, *Slaughterhouse-Five – The Children's Crusade*. Vonnegut conceals a complex texture beneath a deceptively simple surface using the carnival features of parody and the dehumanization projected through war. His use of contradiction and uncertainty as fictional devices represents a significant technical innovation. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "carnavalesque" refers to a source of 'liberation, destruction and renewal'. The origin and meaning of the carnivalesque can be best understood by analyzing the concept of the carnival. In the carnival, social hierarchies of everyday life are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Thus fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell). Official seriousness quite often is a mask that conceals pious pretensions and false authorities. Carnival tries to secure this freedom by celebrating and valorizing all that is low, in the process subverting all that is high and holy. Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of the popular culture which sought a release, a freedom from all that is official, authoritarian and serious.

The firebombing of Dresden, Germany, by Allied forces in 1945 where thousands of civilians were killed, burned to death, or asphyxiated also forms the basis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969. Jerome Klinkowitz opines of the novel that, "[It] perfectly caught America's transformative mood that its story and structure became best-selling metaphors for the new age" (22). It took 20 years for Vonnegut to bring himself to write about the experience of War in *Slaughterhouse-Five* which was published at the height of the Vietnam War, racial unrest and cultural and social upheaval in America. Part of Vonnegut's project was to write an antidote to the war narratives which often makes war look like an adventure worth having thereby decrowning the heroism in wars. Kurt Vonnegut's philosophy is that as human beings we are left with no choice but to simply accept the pre-ordered life finds its best expression in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut's views on death, war, technology and human nature were all affected by his experience in Dresden and these themes become evident in this novel too. Describing the 'Dresden factor' in Vonnegut's life, Klinkowitz says,

the matter of Dresden furnished the world picture for *Player Piano*, the psychological barrier for *The Sirens of Titan*, the backdrop for *Mothers Night*, the informing principle for *Cat's Cradle*, the climax for *God Bless*

You Mr Rosewater and finally the essence of *Slaughterhouse Five*. (16)

David Goldman opines of the Dresden factor in Vonnegut's life as, "Rarely has a single incident so dominated the work of a writer" (ix). Peter Reed opines that, "If the war becomes a general metaphor for Vonnegut's vision of human condition, Dresden becomes the symbol, the quintessence" (186). What made the Dresden bombing even more dreadful to Vonnegut was that as a prisoner, he was ironically protected from the bombs and fire by a slaughterhouse. The bombing was done by the planes and "he was a perpetrator, observer and target, all at the same time" (ix). The little dream Vonnegut took with him to war was not founded on the rubble of insanity, absurdity, and irrationality that he experienced in World War II but on order, stability, and justice. The novel is unconventional in the sense that it has no beginning, middle or end - neither in terms of chronological time-scheme nor of plot development. There is also no suspense and none of the cause and effect relationships that one finds in realistic fiction; the novel reinforces the Tralfamadorian and Bokonomist views that, "It simply is" (62). Vonnegut manages to tell the reader many things and it is hard to decide, what exactly the main theme is. It is a novel about war, about the cruelty and violence involved in war, about people and their nature, their selfishness, about love, humanity, regeneration, motion, and death, which in the carnivalesque is to, uncover, undermine - even destroy, the hegemony of any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world. (*Rabelais*, 9)

Another aspect Vonnegut degrades is the individual identity. Bakhtin's description of the contrasting classical and grotesque body plays into Vonnegut's theme of social construction. According to Dentith, the grotesque body "is not to be thought of as ever completed but always in the process of becoming" (80), while the classical body is completed, flawless, and predictable. Although Vonnegut's characters show examples of the grotesque body, "the consuming maws, pregnant stomachs, evident phalluses and gargantuan evacuations that make it up" (Dentith 68), the classical body best represents the individual as a robot whose purpose the creator of the universe controls.

The novel begins with Billy serving as an American soldier in World War II. After being captured by the Germans, Billy is assigned to work as hard labour in Dresden. Most of the American POW like Billy are young, poorly trained, and completely demoralized. In fact British colonel, who has been in prison for four years, is appalled by their youthfulness. "My God, my God," he says. "It's the Children's Crusade" (11) - thus providing the book with its subtitle, *The Children's Crusade*. The terrible destruction of Dresden is, as Vonnegut sees is, an example of the way the inhuman enemy forces treat their POWs. The mass destruction and degradation of the war that 'lowers all that is high, spiritual, ideal, (*Rabelais*, 19-20) is reflective of the grotesque realism of carnival. Speaking about the Dresden memories in the novel, the character of Vonnegut says: I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about. (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 2)

At the end of the war, Billy returns to his hometown of Ilium, New York, where he settles down and becomes an optometrist. Billy Pilgrim has a

unique ability to become "unstuck in time", which means that he can uncontrollably drift from one part of his life to another "and the trips aren't necessarily fun," (17). The whole novel is organized on this particular movement of drifting as Billy moves in time and space. It consists of numerous sections and paragraphs strung together in a diachronical order selected from random experiences. The whole narrative is in past tense, and it is difficult to identify where exactly the author begins to intervene and the authorial intervention begins. This aspect of the book is identical to the Tralfamadorians books.

There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 64)

The structure of the novel is opposing all that was readymade and complete opposing all pretenses at immutability, seeking a 'dynamic expression', demanding of constant change, at the same time playful and undefined (*Rabelais*, 11), a perfect example of the carnival scenario. Tralfamadorians are aliens, who are "two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends" topped by "a little hand with a green eye in its palm," (19) – and how they can see in four dimensions, enabling them to look at all time all at once, with death and the future holding no fear for them bring to earth a totally different perspective in viewing those on earth, and demystifying the beliefs of the earth account for the carnival the novelist employs in presenting his unusual world view. Billy learns from Tralfamadorians, the aliens that all moments in life – happy or unhappy exist simultaneously and that it is therefore best to think only of pleasant things: "Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (85) This perspective permits Tralfamadorians to view death as merely another moment in life and thereby attach no meaning to it in the true sense of the carnival that is "opposed to all that was readymade and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression, it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms" (*Rabelais*, 11). Further in what the Tralfamadorians teach Billy that there is no cosmic purpose to the universe; that all actions are predetermined and knowledge of the future does not enable one to change destiny; and that free will is only an earthling illusion, augments the spirit of the carnival in the novel.

The world according to Vonnegut is absurd, and life within it is meaningless. Space and time travel, war, and madness become the appropriate vehicles for describing such a condition and no other technique is more suitable than the carnival mode, "the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves" (*Problems*, 123). By viewing contemporary life on Earth from a distant time or planet, or in the context of wide ranges of time and space, or through the eyes of an alien observer, Vonnegut can create at least the impression of a detached

perspective on the human lot. In the carnivalesque-grotesque, the body is shown as continually undergoing change, being taken apart, being reproduced. Nothing is fixed or eternal. However, given the fact that human beings tend not to view their affairs with such remorse and that the outsider's perspective may seem to many idiosyncratic, thereby making the resultant portrayal appear preposterous, incongruous, and irrational.

When both love and lies prove futile as viable responses to the absurd human condition, all that remains-other than suicide is resignation. True wisdom, Vonnegut implies in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, lies in recognizing the things man cannot change. The gravity of the situation can be best understood in Bakhtin's view that only by being outside of a culture can one understand his own culture. This process of 'multiply enriching', opens new possibilities for each culture, revealing hidden 'potentials', promoting 'renewal and enrichment' and creating new potentials (*Rabelais*, 271). In the novel Vonnegut also suggests that it would be nice to possess the courage to change the things we can. Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change, were "the past, the present, and the future" (52). The main idea emerging from *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to be that the proper response to life is one of resigned acceptance. In allowing instances of death to trail off into oblivion with "So it goes," Vonnegut conveys to the readers that death, the ultimate sacrifice in war, can be a rather indifferent matter. Allowing no moment of silence to the victims in his novel, Vonnegut is hasty to move the reader right along to the rest of the story. The phrase "So it goes" recurs one hundred and six times in the novel: it appears every time somebody dies in the novel, and sustains the circular quality of the book. It enables the book, and thus Vonnegut's narration, to go on,

When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in the particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes' (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 27)

Critic Thomas F. Marvin indicates that such a usage of this terse sentence forces the reader to interrupt:

While it is true that the novel adopts the Tralfamadorian custom of saying "so it goes" every time a death occurs, this relentless repetition shows that the fatalistic attitude behind the saying is ridiculous. Eventually readers must rebel and insist that no, it did not have to go that way. Something could and should have been done to make things turn out differently. Death is inevitable, but some deaths are preventable... (128)

The novel concludes with Vonnegut himself describing among other things the latest absurdities surrounding his life and times highlighting the carnival element of futility and meaninglessness of the events influencing him as an individual and the world at large: casualty lists in Vietnam, the death of his father, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the execution of Kindly Edgar Derby, and the end of World War II. Though

Vonnegut sees Dresden firebombing in the context of the unpopular war that overshadowed almost all other issues in the 1960's, he is still able to smile through his tears and provide an affirmation of life. Vonnegut highlights this obvious contradiction by having Billy Pilgrim learn that one can find peace and happiness only through fantasy or senility. The novel is disjointed and unconventional. Its structure reflects this important idea: there is nothing you can say to adequately explain a massacre. In the words of Reed, [the] novel concerns itself not just with Dresden or the war, but with a much broader depiction of a human condition which these events emblematic. (181) Robert Scholes sums up the theme of *Slaughterhouse Five* in the *New York Times* Book Review thus:

Be kind. Don't hurt. Death is coming for all of us anyway, and it is better to be Lot's wife looking back through salty eyes than the Deity that destroyed those cities of the plain in order to save them. ... *Slaughterhouse Five* is an extraordinary success. It is a book we need to read, and to reread. (204)

Vonnegut's pictures debunk the glorification of the advertised image through an act of degradation, an important aspect of the carnival, but as Bakhtin suggests, "regeneration and renewal" need to replace degradation (67), for parody is incomplete if it only deconstructs reality without aspiring to a better reality, a kind of utopia. Out of degradation springs a renewal of life. This paradox of degradation centralizes in all works of parody, since parody attempts to rethink, redesign, and improve fixed conventions. By deconstructing what is considered a stable framework, the satirist shakes the foundation and simultaneously shows the audience what parts of the framework need improvement. The most degraded images in the novel are those symbols which define the American culture and society represented through the images of science, religion and war.

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