

# Celebration of Meaninglessness in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

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## Abstract

*This is an exploratory inquiry on Slaughterhouse-Five of Kurt Vonnegut. The inquiry uses insights from the postmodernist art to investigate how the novel celebrates the meaninglessness employing various techniques and how the protagonist Billy Pilgrim comes to terms with his meaningless existence. It was found that the novel uses the postmodernist novelistic technic and theme such as the use of the subversion of narration, pastiche, parody, intertextuality, adaptation, alienation, paradox, fragmented character and narrative structure as the devices for diminishing painful experiences of Second World War.*

**Keywords: celebration, meaninglessness, postmodernism, parody, pastiche, irony, and intertextuality**

## Introduction

This study aims at an analytical study of celebration of meaninglessness in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a cult novel of postmodernist fiction. Unlike modernist writing that is characterized by the lamentation of the purposelessness, meaninglessness and the fragmentation of human life and values in general, postmodernist writings like the novel, on the contrary, is characterized by its ability to celebrate the meaninglessness and fragmentation of human life (De Rose). As Peter Barry puts it the novel also makes its distinct stand as a postmodernist writing in which "fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating, phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief" (84). The liberating phenomenon is the way the novel comes to terms with unprecedented disaster. It is seen as a therapy to grapple with pain, suffering, and meaningless existence. In a way, celebration of meaninglessness liberates humanity from pain. To be more precise, it is seen as a defense mechanism for the horrors the characters have undergone in the novel. So, Vonnegut's writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be seen as "a therapeutic process" that allow him to "uncover and deal with his trauma in World War II" (Vees-Gulani 175). By using "creative means to overcome his distress", Vonnegut makes it possible for us to trace his path "to recovery" (175).

In order to analyze the novel in terms of celebration of meaninglessness, the researcher has applied the theoretical tool of postmodernism to highlight "the alienation of individuals and the meaninglessness of human existence" and its

celebratory attitudes (Murfin and Ray 360). Unlike modernist, postmodernists do not reject fragments, alienation of humans and the void owing to the absence of emancipatory grand narratives. They accept the situation of void, fragments and attempt to create life out of absence and death. Thus, the ongoing research that primarily aims at establishing celebration of meaninglessness as device for grappling with horrors of war is compatible with the liberating spirit of postmodernism. This aspect of postmodernism is analyzed in terms of the individual life of the characters and the overall structural make-up of the novel.

The predominant critical views of the *Slaughterhouse Five* can be categorized into two groups. One school of critics are concerned with the structure of the novel-i.e. they present the uniform voice of novel departing from the conventional novelistic tradition entailing the traits of the postmodern novel (Moraru ; Baym; Jones) while another school of thought is preoccupied with the theme such as fire-bombing of Dresden by Allied forces-horror of World War II, meaninglessness, alienation of the character in the novel (Britannica ; Merriam-Webster's ; Perkins et al.). All of these views tell us what is there in the novel both structurally and thematically but do not tell us anything about the purpose of the devices and choice of the treatment of the subject matter in the novel. Therefore, this paper investigates the purposes of the use of the postmodernist devices and the theme in the novel. I claim following the idea of Josephine Hendin that the choices of techniques and theme of *Slaughterhouse Five* is correlated with the fundamental assumption of celebration of meaninglessness of postmodernism as a defense mechanism to grapple with the horrific experiences and uncertainties of the post war period.

### **Postmodernist interpellation in *Slaughterhouse-Five***

*Slaughterhouse-Five* thematizes the destructive historical event, the Second World War, particularly the bombing of Dresden. It opens with a claim that “all this happened more or less. The war parts, any way, are pretty much true” (1). This parodies the eighteenth century novelistic convention in which novels claims of being authentic. At another moment, Vonnegut’s outrageous subtitle to *Slaughterhouse-Five* infers the novel’s parodic intentions through its self-advertisement as a novel “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from” (1). This describes the book as having been written in a ‘telegraphic, schizophrenic’ mode. Vonnegut continues the parody in his novel when the beginning and end of the novel prefigures early Vonnegut’s writes:

It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet? (21)

In the above quote, Vonnegut tries to represent the narration in an alternative perspective to adapt into new representative mode. Opening up, new horizons, the writer is making or creating new space where, at least, one can feel sigh of relief from the clutches of convention. Liberating oneself from the clutches of convention and adapting into new space gives room for the free play of other perspectives. The technique of parody, “imitates a specific literary work or style of an author for comic effect, usually to ridicule or criticize that work or the style. Parody is often used to make a satiric point” (Murfin and Ray 328). Therefore, Vonnegut adopts the technique of parody in the novel for liberation from the conventional mode of representation and gives enough space for playfulness. This parody is implied by Vonnegut in order to contain, control and organize the emotions or situations. Distancing oneself from the convention is the way, postmodernist writer liberates or emancipates oneself from conventions.

Another way, through which Vonnegut celebrates meaninglessness in the novel, is by undermining the genre. In conventional genre, combat scenes are represented with a lot of pomp and celebration. But Vonnegut, speaking in his own voice in chapter one, attacks fiction which treats “war as a glamorous activity” (15). He mocks also the pedantry of the war writer by describing his own ‘clumsy’ attempts to “make fictional capital out of war” (2). Peter Jones stresses the difference between the work of Vonnegut and other novelists in the way they deal with the war and their narrative structure. “Slaughterhouse-Five reverses almost all of the generic traditions of the Hemingway-Mailer-James Jones combat centered line of war fiction” (198). Such a task of creating an exciting war novel, proves impossible, since the “memories of war” remain virtually submerged, emergent only in random and unstructured recollections; they stay for the most part unrealized, stubbornly resistant to the writers, mechanistic efforts to order them systematically (2). Vonnegut takes great pleasure in disclosing in chapter one virtually all of the narrative events of the novel “the climax of the novel would be the execution of poor old Edgar derby” in order to dispose right away with the fixities of sequential narration (10). Henceforth, and from the opening pages of the novel, he is released from any obligations to comply with conventional notions of genre. The formal innovation implied by such an undertaking matches the reinvention of his life undertaken by Billy Pilgrim, the novel’s mock hero, who turns to science fiction for help after witnessing the fire bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut mocks his novel by undermining its value thus:

I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write as out the

destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that I would be a masterpiece at least make me a lot of money. Since the subject was so big. (2)

In this he makes it apparent that he has been trying to write a novel about Dresden fire-bombing where hundreds and thousands of people lost their lives. But for twenty-three years he could not write because memory does not come in full swing since “not many words about Dresden came from my mind” (2). Absence of memory makes him difficult to write the novel. Yet he has been trying, writing over and over again but could not finish it. In a sense, he is trying to write about the absence which does not come easily. Absence, and memory are the issues most contemplative for the postmodernist (Hendin). By reinventing and reconstructing memory, they are exploring, even if memories are devastated, to find a new way of dealing with them. The New Encyclopedia Britannica observes, “Vonnegut attempts to re-create his Dresden experience in fictional form as symbol of the cruelty and destructiveness of war down through the centuries” (430). Recreation and reinvention are used by Vonnegut in his novel to celebrate the meaninglessness that he experienced in the war. Thus, Vonnegut celebrates meaninglessness by recreating a horrific experience in the novel.

Another motif in Vonnegut’s fiction that helps celebrate meaninglessness is that of repetition. For instance, characters reappearing in different novels, and phrases is most apparent in *Slaughterhouse-Five* where the phrase “so it goes” appears 106 times, following immediately after the report of any death or anything approximating a death in the text (2). The mechanical regularity of the appearance of this phrase is a denial of any form of development and progression. This denial is entirely appropriate as it encapsulates the philosophy the Tralfamadorians persuade Billy to accept, that everything is predetermined, and individuals are unable to make any differences on the course of events. “Vonnegut’s novels describe a deterministic, mechanistic world- a world of cause and effect with no overriding purpose or goal” (Foster 873). This belief involves the denial of any meaning to change over time: things just are; each moment is already set before we reach it. By repeating one thing over and over again one is celebrating the same thing. Repetition amounts to playfulness; playfulness is what is seen as celebration.

Celebration of meaninglessness is an adaptation practiced by postmodern writers like Vonnegut to look into life and the world from alternative perspective, particularly a mechanism to come to terms with horrific experiences like that of war. This novel too, is concerned with mechanism and conduct of the individual mind and life with the search for a different adaptation, and angle of vision, a mode of feeling or behavior which will alter the protagonist’s condition. The protagonist of the novel, Billy Pilgrim takes recourse to different modes of adaptation in his life as a mechanism to keep going. He does not lament even

though he is alienated and finds himself helpless, but finds a new adaptation, a mode to keep going. Passivity and traveling in time are his adaptations, while Billy is in the war. Billy does not fight in the war, he bears no weapon, has no combat dress. He simply remains a figure of fun. In that way “Billy was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends” (29). Thus Billy’s presence in the war bears no meaning at all. He did not “look like a soldier at all, but looked like a filthy flamingo” (31). This shows how disgusting Billy is in the war. Billy’s passivity becomes more evident in war when Vonnegut reports that another character, Roland Weary has been saving Billy’s life by using all forms of cruelties. Vonnegut writes:

He had been saving Billy’s life for days, cursing him, kicking him, slapping him, making him move. It was absolutely necessary that cruelty be used, because Billy would not do anything to save himself. Billy wanted to quit. He was cold, hungry, embarrassed and incompetent. He could scarcely distinguish between sleep and wakefulness now on the third day, found no important differences, between walking and standing still. (32)

In that way Billy has no enthusiasm for war. He accepts all the cruelties meted out against him. He neither protests nor reacts against it in any form. So, detaching oneself from the emotion, Billy remains passive throughout the war. Actually, passivity is his method of keeping alive. Every body in the war, who are active, intelligent, have strong fascination with the war like Roland Weary and Edger Derby, are killed except Billy Pilgrim. “Pessimism may serve a moral purpose as an indictment of an undesirable status quo or it may have a protective function as a defense against unrealistic hopes” (Hendin 243). Thus, by maximizing emotional disconnection from himself, Billy hopes to distance himself from fear, anger or despair.

Alienation is one way through which Billy avoids painful confrontations, in a way it makes him suffer less. In the war, Billy wants to quit, time and again he asks his friends in the war to “leave me alone. You guys go on without me” (32). He is alienated in the war, since Roland Weary and two other scouts regard themselves as “Three Musketeers” (40). Because of this alienation Billy suffers less than these three soldiers. They are all killed but Billy survives. After the war, he has a relatively settled life, but is alone. He does not tell anybody what he has experienced in the war, even to his wife. So she feels he is “full of secrets” (115). He is himself, occasionally suffering from nervous collapse without anybody’s knowledge visits doctors. This alienation at home helps Billy somehow to deal with his pain in his own way. The alienation of Billy becomes more intense, after he is in an airplane crash, in which he loses his father-in-law and his wife and himself sustains terrible injury. Now he has nobody with him, he becomes unfit for his official work, his daughter gets married, his son is in Vietnam. However, Billy does not lament his

alienation but celebrates it by writing and preparing lectures; “actually, Billy’s outward listlessness was a screen. This listlessness concealed a mind which was fizzing and flashing thrillingly, was preparing letters and lectures about the flying saucers, the negligibility of death, and the true nature of time” (181). So, Billy’s alienation in the war protects Billy from painful confrontation, his alienation back at home makes Billy a creative genius. In the words of Josephine Hedin, postwar fiction “reflect the use of fragmentation and alienation as defenses against painful confrontations” (241). He stays hours, writing, letters “devoting himself to the calling much higher than mere business” in order to provide corrective lenses to the wretched souls on earth (27). This helps Billy from further devastation.

The novel also employs fragmented character and blurred -narrative structure to respond to the untold miseries experienced by the character and inadequacy of the traditional narrative mode. Fragmentation of character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is characterized by Billy’s travel in time. Instead of presenting a consistent and coherent character of Billy, Vonnegut represents him as a fragmented character. For instance, Vonnegut writes about Billy’s time travel thus:

LISTEN:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to steep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says; and pays random visits to all the events in between. (22)

This fragmented Billy appears a different man or acts a different part of his life randomly in various circumstances. Sometimes Billy becomes a senile widower, sometimes a prisoner of war, sometimes acts the part of death, wedding, birth. So at one moment he experiences several things or part of his life ranging from birth to death. In this way Billy visits and takes recourse in fragments that provides him temporary solace. Tralfamadorians also teach Billy to rest his self on fragments particularly on pleasant moments. They say “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (112). Thus, by presenting fragmented self of Billy, Vonnegut serves the special function of reducing of Billy’s pain for providing him enough space to take refuge in different fragment if one does not help him. Another aspect of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is the fragmentary narrative structure in which there is no sequential narrative development. Vonnegut deconstructs the linear development by writing early in the novel how he is going to begin and end this story, what would be its climax. End, middle and beginning come together in the novel, actually blurring their differences (Baym 2181). It is so “short and jumbled and jangled” Vonnegut writes about this novel in the first chapter (18). Vonnegut attempts to make the pain less severe by presenting fragmented character and fragmented narrative structure. “Fragmentation of character and

narrative often serve as devices for allaying anxiety” (Hendin 241). Hence, by presenting Billy’s fragmented character, he provides Billy space for temporary refuge and by deconstructing the linear narrative structure, Vonnegut grapples with the clutches of conventionality.

The novel uses standard literary devices to achieve unconventional effects. Irony is the dominant comic style. Irony yokes unlike things and by force of the tension between truths, or between what is true and what is not both mirrors and organizes conflict undercutting the emotional impact of each term of its equations (Murfin and Ray). Vonnegut’s orchestration of World War Second with science fiction flights to Tralfamadore juggles public catastrophe with personal anguish as it develops a working defensive system against pain in all its intensities. Vonnegut tries to yoke World War II experiences of Billy with his trips to Tralfamadore. Parts of World War II experiences are “partly true” as Vonnegut claims and Billy’s trips to Tralfamadore are more fictitious (1). In this way, by bringing together, truth and fantasy, Vonnegut provides a space for celebration. This, in turn, becomes a tool of survival in the novel for Billy.

Another dominant intellectual style of much post war fiction is paradox. It is a technique of giving opposites equal weight. Paradox is used to grab the reader’s attention to see something in a new way (Murfin and Ray). Viewing the world and life in a new way contrary to normal expectation, is what played out in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For instance, when Billy is admonished by the Tralfamadorian, to look at life and the world in a different way, they ask him to “concentrate only on pleasant moments” and avoid the darkest moment (112). Back on earth Billy is spreading these Tralfamadorian gospels by writing and lecturing on it. Every body including his daughter and others find it all nonsense but Billy insists “that everything he had said on the radio was true” (24). Here, Billy is playing with the paradox, what others claim to be false, for Billy is truth. That way Billy is exploring new way to give equal importance to alternative perspective as to the mainstream. This alternative perspective to which Billy promptly sticks is the result of his disbelief in the mainstream and his temporary refuge in fantasy which he found most appropriate to his condition. Thus, the technique of paradox in postmodern fiction are used to challenge traditional distinctions between weakness and strength, good and evil, truth and falsehood, the victim and his oppressor.

Next technique used in the novel to express a sense of the interchangeability of experience is the pastiche. Pastiche is a literary technique that draws heavily on other works for playful purposes (Murfin and Ray). For instance, Billy has long before read a science fiction, *The Big Board* by Kilgore Trout when he is in the veteran’s hospital. This novel “was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-22” (192). The story of this novel and the story that is told by

Billy about his life correspond to a considerable degree. Billy also tells the same story of being kidnapped by Tralfamadorians who put him and another woman on display in a zoo. Billy, in that way, interchanges the story of the novel with his own, assuming himself as the abducted man. This interchangeability of experience helps Billy to replace his painful experience with something that gave him solace. Pastiche, thus, operates on the life of Billy as a means of celebration. In effect, it helps Billy to lessen his painful experience.

Intertextuality is another technique that gives room for the free play of various ideas or fragments. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* abounds in intertextuality. "It is a condition of interconnectedness among texts because its language inevitably contains common points of reference with other texts through such things as allusion, quotation, genre and style" (Murfin and Ray 219). Vonnegut takes into his novel extracts from history books, from poems and from the Bible. He even has pictorial illustrations. He includes a few quotations from history book as "it was *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery*, by Mary Endell. It was published in 1908, and its introduction began: *it is hoped that this little book will make itself useful*" (16). Here Vonnegut tries to explore the history of Dresden. In many instances he turns to the pages of history like this throughout the novel, and brings different historical references. Another historical reference he brought in the novel is from the book "*The Destruction of Dresden by an Englishman named David Irving*" in which he wrote "*I deeply regret that British and U.S. Bombers killed 135,000 people in the attack on Dresden*" (179). Vonnegut is bringing together fact and fiction, making text over text. Similarly, in the novel Vonnegut inserts lines of poetry from others. Not only that he quotes from science fiction of Kilgore Trout, but also includes an illustration of a chain hung from the neck of a woman over her breast. Few lines from Gideon Bible are also there in the novel. In this way, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is seen as history within history, fiction within fiction, quotes, mixture of genres giving somewhat amalgamatory texture to the novel. "Vonnegut novels mingle techniques and voices from memoir, science fiction and journalistic essays in books" (Jones 198). And this intertextuality and text within text is widely seen as something unconventional, playful and something celebratory. They are inserted in order to make the novel more playful, and to add something, when there is absence or exhaustion. In this way, intertextuality gives way to alternative vision of life different from conventional to fragmentary and playful.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, the themes of detachment and meaninglessness are celebrated in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as device for diminishing the emotional charge of painful experience through postmodern technique of subversion of narration, irony, intertextuality, paradox, parody, adaptation and so on by opening up new window of opportunity for the protagonist and the author alike.



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