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**A POSTMODERNIST READING OF KURT VONNEGUT'S  
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE**

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**Abstract**

After World War II, postmodernism began to rise as a movement and so many novelists began using a non-linear style, which involved the use of techniques like: shift in time, stream of consciousness, interior monologues, juxtapositions, ... etc. The readers felt lost in the sense that they cannot grasp the meaning easily because the narrative is not sequential. Time shifts in the novel from the present to the past and to the future. However, it is only through a close reading that readers can differentiate between the frame story and the story within. Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2017) is one of those postmodernist American writers who used postmodernist elements clearly in this novel which reflect the fragmentation of modern western culture: fragmentation of time, space, language, and human subject. In his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* or *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-dance with Death* (1969) he uses a humorous style to satirize authorities as well as society. The novel tackles the atrocities of war and the bombing of Dresden because Vonnegut was a true witness of that event. He was part of the cruel experience of World War II where he was captured and taken as a prisoner.

Vonnegut's fiction reflects the literary, philosophical, and social tendencies of the late twentieth century. His anti-realistic novels represent a guide in the postmodern period in American literature. The most important thing in his novels is the old question of free will and the meaning of life, death, and love. The paper is concerned with

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the postmodernist rendering of time and free will in *Slaughterhouse Five*.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, juxtaposition, Slaughterhouse, Tralfamadore, a story within a story.

## Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

As a movement, Postmodernism began after World War II not so much as a continuation of Modernism, but rather a break away from it. World War II affected the whole life of people as well as the process of narration. Postmodernism can be linked with the power shifts and dehumanization of that period of war after which the position of man in this universe is interrogated, his rational apparatus is challenged by so many forces, and his existential direction is suffering a predicament. People began losing their individuality in a wasteland-like world. The sense of loss began in the writing of postmodernist novelists, including Kurt Vonnegut. They often began creating unreal narrators to mislead the readers and make them unable to grasp the real meaning of the text. Moreover, fragmentation is used in their writing which directs their narration towards a collage-style form and transitions in character and place. Postmodernist writers want their readers to forget the fact that the writer is an authority or their text conveys a direct and apparent meaning. In order to distort the narration and hinder the readers' perception of the meaning, they use certain tools like dark humor, wordplay, and irony (McHale 13).

In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard (1924—1998), a theorist of Postmodernism, introduces his preliminary and highly powerful definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives,' where metanarratives are recognized as totalizing stories about history and the aims of the human race that give knowledge and cultural

practices legitimization. Lyotard develops his own description of postmodernity as “an age of fragmentation and pluralism” (Lyotard xxiv).

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the well-known and appreciated writers of the post-World War II era in American literature. Many of his terms have entered the American lexicon and its popular culture and become as clichés, like “So it goes,” that occurs more than a hundred times in *Slaughterhouse Five* that was in Vonnegut’s *New York Times* memorial. Science fiction elements, jokes, drawings, risqué limericks, cartoonish characters, flying saucers are included in his works through which he asks significant questions about human nature and man’s aim in life. Moreover, he uses the techniques of metafiction to question the relationship between art and reality. However, his fiction presents a mocking critique of “social injustice, war, and environmental degradation while managing simultaneously to express love and compassion for the weak, bewildered, and often lonely human beings he depicts” (Farrell ix).

Throughout his career, Vonnegut was an extremely moral writer, a person who was fearless to talk about issues related to authority: organized religion, military science that deals with human beings as throwaway, U. S. government that is interested in causing atrocities at home and overseas. Some literary critics ignored his work as “serious literature” because it was too common and too available. He described himself as an atheist, a matter which appealed to his readers to preserve what he called “the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty” (Qtd. in Farrell x). Most of Vonnegut’s characters are stuck in one destination and they are incapable of changing their miserable situation. They are often directed by external forces like natural disasters, sophisticated scientific means, or aliens. They have no control over their lives because they always feel that

they are lonely, like Billy Pilgrim in this novel who has the fantasy of Tralfamadore in order to escape from the cruelty of war as well as of modern people. He needs to be loved and to be taken care of by other people. Vonnegut creates such new realities like the Tralfamadore to criticize modern society (Dano 9).

As a postmodernist book, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is considered by Mikkel Jensen as a significant text of the first wave of postmodernism because it makes the postmodern ideas popular and present them to people in an aesthetic way (Jenson 8). The novel is a story within a story. Its context is established in an introductory chapter and by a few paragraphs in the concluding chapter. Chapter 1 begins with an assurance by the author-narrator that “All this happened,” as if guaranteeing the integrity of a work so full of fantasy. A cautious reader immediately is put on guard by the assurance (Bloom 24). The narrator continues to explain that many of the specific facts of the novel are true: “One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden...for taking a teapot.... Another...did threaten to have his enemy killed by hired gunmen after the war.... I really did go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money” (Vonnegut 1).

*Slaughterhouse Five* is an antiwar novel based on Vonnegut’s own experience in the World War II during which he observed the bombing and complete damage of Dresden. He witnessed the bombing of Dresden as he was captured by the Germans and was taken as a prisoner and kept in a slaughterhouse; that is why his description is authentic and reliable more than anyone else in the novel. That experience caused him an everlasting pain and sorrow that is reflected in this novel (Vees-Gulani 175). He survived firebombing of the city on February 13–14, 1945, in which 135,000 Germans were killed, nearly twice as many deaths than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. A few American prisoners and their German guards are still alive. Dresden was never fortified or used for strategic purposes and, then, was not

considered a military target. For this reason, thousands of refugees from all over Europe joined in Dresden for protection for its apparent safety for them (Bloom 1). Josh Simpson claims that although the novel on the surface is the story of the writer's Dresden, but on a much deeper level it is also the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man so tortured and troubled by the burden of the past that he finds it essential to re-establish his own reality (Simpson 148). Through this novel, Vonnegut wants to convey a message to all people not to take part in any war or encourage any aggressive feelings because war causes only atrocities and traumatic experiences. This is clear from his own words where he says:

When I speak to students, I do moralize. I tell them not to take more than they need, . . . , I tell them not to kill, even in self-defense. . . . I tell them not to commit war crimes or to help others to commit war crimes or to help others to commit war crimes. These morals go over very well.  
(Qtd. in Mustazza 34).

The novel has a unique place in the history of American literature because of Vonnegut's use of ironies and non-linear narrative. He uses the non-linear narrative technique, like William Faulkner in his novel *The Sound and Fury* (1929), to tell the story of Billy's life experience that involves his imprisonment during war-time in Dresden, his life after war in America, and his fantasy of Planet Tralfamadore through chaotic time-space perspective to show the absurdity and cruelty of war (Shi 553).

Moreover, Vonnegut has furnished his novel with the flashbacks and flash-forwards. Sarah Fay, an author, believes that: "the linear plot is abandoned as Billy

zips into the past or whips ahead to the future without warning. Reading it feels like being inside a pinball machine. And if time travel weren't enough, Vonnegut throws aliens into the mix (Qtd. in Mustazza 16). Vonnegut uses this technique of non-linear plot to serve his aim of expressing the fragmentation of modern man in this life that is filled with destruction, loneliness, and traumatic experiences of people because of war.

The main character, Billy, has been "unstuck in time," (10) a term that refers to the fact that Billy has become free. He tells his experiences which include a fictitious time travel and visits to the planet of Tralfamadore where "there is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects" (88). Fay states that: "Billy witnesses the Bombing of Dresden, returns home safely but emotionally numb, marries a woman he does not love, has two children, and eventually becomes "unstuck in time" (Qtd. in Mustazza 15). He jumps from the past to the future and then to the present in an attempt to cope with other people as the unhuman war experience has affected him seriously. He has become under the trauma of the memories of the destructive bombing of Dresden. That is why it is difficult for the reader to know where Billy is at any given time in the novel. Being "unstuck in time" means that he is hesitating between the present and the past with no control over his movement and emphasis of the absurd nature of war. Time is very important to understand Billy's development. Throughout the technique of stream of consciousness, Pilgrim has in his mind a blending of time, i.e., the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation. Vonnegut's own life as well as Billy Pilgrim's, are categorized by an obsessive return to the past (Rodney 80). Being unstuck in time is in its essence the thought of fragmentation, duality in character, i. e., the state of fluctuating from one moment to another and back again without taking into consideration the situations and without much control (Sumner 35).

Christina Jarvis, a Professor of English, believes that Billy is fragmented through space and time throughout the technique of time travel. His body is in various space/time scopes at the same time. This gives him the chance to go through his birth, death, and World War II again and again. His fragmentation is apparent physically and mentally as a result of the cruel experience of war (Jarvis 88). Vonnegut makes Billy capable of travel by time to Dresden, for example, to give his readers the exact picture about the wartime experience. In his book *A Critical Companion to Popular Contemporary Writers*, Thomas Marvin asserts that:

Time travel allows Vonnegut to create the impression that readers are looking at events as they happen, rather than through the mists of memory. But because most readers do not believe in time travel, the technique also highlights the artificiality of any writing about the past (114).

Whether Tralfamadore exists or it is part of Billy's imagination is a question that has puzzled scholars, critics, and readers of this novel for years. One critic states that, "Billy . . . increasingly withdraws from reality and ultimately loses his sanity," whereas another argues that ". . . from the moment he comes 'unstuck in time,' Billy continually tries to construct for himself an Edenic experience out of the materials that he garners over the course of some twenty years" (Qtd. in Simpson 149). However, there is a suggestion that the novel is "so constructed that one cannot determine whether or not what Billy sees is real" (150). The question of Tralfamadore's existence is left by Vonnegut open to debate; however, a close reading of the novel strongly indicates that it exists only in Billy's mind.

Vonnegut makes Billy "spastic in time" (23) as a metaphor for the traumatic experiences that he passed through during the bombings of Dresden. In fact, Billy never leaves World War II because it was a cruel experience he had at that time.

That is why he moves from one period of time to another. This is clear in the following lines:

Billy has gone to sleep 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. He says. Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun (23).

These lines clearly reflect the sense of loss as well as the incompatibility of time for both Billy and the Tralfamadorians. Time is insignificant for both of them. That is why Vonnegut introduces Billy in the novel as being 'unstuck in time' in order to be free from any chronological obligation. This technique of time-travel helps the novelist a lot to place his protagonist in any period of time to reflect the fragmentation of modern man as a result of the traumatic experience caused by the atrocities of war.

Billy overcomes his trauma with the aid of Tralfamadorian fantasy and his idea of time travel. Only then is he able to take a function although it is not a full recovering one because he is unable to escape from the trauma that continuously intrudes in his life. His anxiety is under his control to the extent that nothing can surprise him or make him terrified and his only trouble is the disability of sleeping and his infrequent fits of crying (Vees-Gulani 180).



When Billy is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians by a flying saucer on his daughter's wedding night in 1967 where they take him to their planet and put him in a zoo, he asks "why me?" (55) which is the echo of a question an American soldier asks to a German soldier who is beating him in chapter six. Moreover, the question can expand to the great mysteries of the book, Why Dresden? and, especially, Why war and brutality? Whether from the Tralfamadorians or the German the answer to the question of why is the same, although the Tralfamadorians are more thorough and more explicit in answering (Bloom 39): "Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because the moment simply is.... We are trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why". The German simply answers, "Vy you? Vy anybody?" (66) This analogy between the Tralfamadorians and the Germans shows the inhumane consequences of accepting the Tralfamadorian point of view because the rejection of personal responsibility simply results in the fierce excesses of the Nazis (Merrill 72).

Billy begins one of his journeys through time as a German prisoner of war about to be given a shower in Dresden in 1944. When a German soldier turns on a master valve, the water is like "scalding rain." It "jangled Billy's skin without thawing the ice in the marrow of his long bones" (73). This sensation of being showered with hot water causes young Pilgrim to go back in time to his infancy. Suddenly he "was a baby who had just been bathed by his mother." In order to powder him, his mother takes him into "a rosy room ... filled with sunshine" (73). The remembrance of that sunshine upon him causes Billy to jump forward in time to a point when he is a "middle-aged optometrist again, playing hacker's golf ... on a blazing summer Sunday morning" (73). When he bends down to retrieve his golf ball safely trapped in the cup, Billy suddenly travels in time to the moment when he finds himself trapped by the Tralfamadorians, "strapped to a yellow contour chair ... aboard a flying saucer, which was bound for Tralfamadore" (73-74). Billy travels

uncontrollably to non-sequential moments of his life, or as Vonnegut says, “paying random visits to all events in between” (75). This reflects the novel’s structure which has a beginning, middle and end but not in their old places. Billy’s shifts from one period of his life to another is his own defense mechanism in dealing with painful experiences in his life. Vonnegut has acknowledged that he has used his fragmented manner and that it hasn’t come out as a linear story to show the absurdity of war, together with the firebombing of Dresden which makes such painful memories in Billy’s life (Schatt 57).

The point of *Slaughterhouse Five* is that there is no present. Vonnegut simply ends that narrative episode of the novel and shifts to a presentation of the Tralfamadorian philosophy, which Billy comes to advance because “so many...souls” on earth “were lost and wretched,” and he was “prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (21).

Another postmodernist element the novel deals with is free will. It is the thought that people are able to choose and decide their own fates and that their actions make a change in determining their future. But to his dismay, the protagonist discovers that he is directed by external forces and peoples’ destinies are decided by others. That is the reason why Billy finds happiness and peace only when he is on the Tralfamadore planet (Bly, 26). Vonnegut sets the concept of free will clearly in this novel whereby a Tralfamadorian tells Billy that “Only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (74). Billy has a conversation with aliens on the planet Tralfamadore in 1967 in an attempt to emphasize man’s inhumanity and brutality during the Dresden Holocaust. He questions the human free will. If humans have free will, what then is the purpose of their brutal actions, like the bombing of Dresden during World War II (Schatt, 58). The Tralfamadorians do not hinder the stream of time although they

have some knowledge of their fate and the end of the planet. Billy asks a Tralfamadorian about that in the following lines:

“We know how the Universe ends,” said the guide,

"If You know this," said Billy, 'isn't there some way you can prevent it [the Universe will be destroyed by a Tralfamadorian pilot who presses a button]? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?'

“He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way” (55).

Billy realizes that the free will that he has always considered a fact seems to be an illusion. He comes to know that bravery lies not in dramatic gestures or the domination of ultimate principles, but in making peace with our catastrophic limits, being decent, and taking care of others who need our help. From Billy's experience we come to know that despite the absurdity of modern life, humans are capable of self-respect, self-denial, and love. This means that there is always something beautiful about human nature and people do have choices, even in their absurd world (Sumner 39).

Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* in a “telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales” that separates the individual situations and relinks them in terms of the synchrony of conflicting items. Whenever the realistic method, used by Vonnegut, violates its diagrammatical method, it draws long periods of time in the life of Pilgrim being a prisoner of war who has stayed alive after the fire-bombing of Dresden and, in a science fiction strategy of the novel, he is kidnapped to an “extra-

terrestrial planet, Tralfamadore” (26), where he learns a new way of looking at things, he says:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadoreans can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever (26-27).

The concept of free will is not accepted by the Tralfamadoreans. This means that humans are not free to determine or affect the course of their own lives. They teach Billy how to look at his life as a rounded structure or a long line of events. Their philosophy of time rejects the reality of death. Man is allowed to select among the eternal moments of his presence. If people have the freedom to travel through time, they can try the Tralfamadorean credo and pay no attention to the unpleasant times, and focus on the good ones only (Merrill 69).

In conclusion, this novel clearly expresses the chaotic modern world in which people suffer from continuous predicaments; a world that is devoid of any meaning and full of decay and loss of ethics and morals. There is only war that leads to more

deaths, atrocities and traumatic experiences from which people continuously suffer. Through the character of Billy who is portrayed as 'unstuck in time', Vonnegut shows the image of modern man who is in a big dilemma as if he is not himself. That is why Billy appears in different stances that reflect the suffering and difficulties he has been through since the bombing of Dresden. Being a prisoner of war has dominated his life and the novel shows how he is obsessed with horror, guilt, and despair as a result of his experience during his captivity. That is why he recognizes his life through the use of time-travel technique in which he doesn't live his life day by day, but jumps from one period to another in order to be able to live in his own world.

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