Postmodern Narrative in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five

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Abstract

This article explores Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) as a postmodern critique of modern literary modes. As a novel recapitulating within itself a postmodern relative perspective of reality, it elucidates one aspect of postmodernism, that of literary experimentation. Vonnegut experiments with the narrator, setting and characters of the novel to provide a fictional critique of the literary exhaustion prevailing in modern literary modes. Experimentation is thus remedial replenishment for such exhaustion through authorial metafictional intrusion into the text. Accordingly, the article uses Patricia Waugh, Gérard Genette and Mikhail Bakhtin’s narrative theory to examine the experimental technique in the novel. What makes the majority of metafictional style unique is not only its presence in the novel, but also its conflated depiction of the American individual’s suffering after the Second World War. For this later style, the self-justifying manner in the novel extrapolates textual dialogic relations to accentuate the author’s critical voice. Such voice originates in the main narrative point of view in the text and is known as focalization.

Keywords: Discourse, Focalization, Metafiction, Postmodernism, Vonnegut

I. Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a former American soldier and prisoner-of-war in Dresden, Germany. Billy suffers different hardships during his service in Dresden which was bombed during the Second World War. He was imprisoned several times by the Germans. He would escape from prison but be recaptured. Finally, he was evacuated to New York, America. On arriving, he marries and encounters different people, among them the novelist Kilgore Trout. At the end of the novel, Billy and his wife survive a plane crash. He is thus taken to hospital. During his stay there he falls asleep and time travels to Dresden. The story of Billy is told in flashback through ten episodes. The narrative construction of the novel is typical of postmodern fiction. This is because the events are told via both the author’s omniscient narrator who tells Billy’s story, and Billy’s own account of his story in Dresden. The narrative category of *Slaughterhouse-Five* conforms to the postmodern literary tradition. Postmodern fiction portrays a great deal of human experience following the Second World War. The most conspicuous token of human experience in the novel is the metafictional essence making it “a postmodern novel relying on metafiction, the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a writer’s preface about how he came to write his novel” (Chellamuthu, 2005, p.2). Postmodern relative reality is depicted throughout, “the factual method, whenever it becomes diagrammatic in this book, sketches long stretches of time in the life of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim” (Hoffman, 2005, p.549). In different textual representations, *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides vital and live examples of human suffering, the need for liberty and constructive hopes for peace in a seemingly agitated world. In the most outlandish claim, postmodernity heralds the absence of reality in broad textual structures as “projects of political transformation” (Kellner, 1989, p.84). The deliberate, as well as the conscious, repudiation of reality in postmodern texts is ascribed to the radically new way of looking at the world from a commonplace humane perspective. The Second World War, therefore, left its atrocious causality imprint on societies not only on the Continent, but also all over the world.¹

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The devastating consequences of the war inspired many thinkers to render the history of the world in avant-garde terminology, that is postmodernity. As a result, human arts, especially literature, took a different stance. Before the advent of postmodernity, literature was regularly touted in a united way and had certain labels, e.g. modern literature which was characterized by a stable and expressive poetics. However, postmodern literature has been argued by critics as giving a poignant name to the “new era”. Vonnegut is, consequently, providing an “anti-traditional narrative point of view involving the author hints in the text” (Atchison, 2008, p.27). Yet, it is critically argued that postmodern literature was a philosophical revival of modern literature in the first phases. Hence, an inclusive historical body of postmodern literature has been trying to establish a “narrative that purport[s] to recount universal history (parentheses mine)” (Vanhoozer, 2003, p. 11). Postmodern poetics, consequently, is a reactive fiction to the previous stable “narrative” conventions, seeking to affirm its distinctive and characteristic literary features. Slaughterhouse-Five therefore has a “crucial concern with the novel’s narrative point of view” (Pholer, 1997, p.103). This article focuses on Kurt Vonnegut’s (1969) novel Slaughterhouse-Five. It will conduct a narrative analysis of the novel. The main focus of the article will deal with the postmodern era in which the novel was written. Generally, the novel has been studied intensively in the fields of science fiction and metafiction. However, the current article will analyze Slaughterhouse-Five from a narrative perspective. Three narrative concepts will be incorporated into the study, namely, Patricia Waugh’s self-reflexivity, Gerard Genette’s focalization and Mikhail Bakhtin’s dilogism. The inclusion of such narrative concepts in this study hinges on a postmodern celebration of the intrinsic narrative qualities of the text. That is, postmodern fictional textuality abandons the inherent components of fictional text. In brief, postmodern fiction highlights the construction of a text by its narrative features, such as narrator, setting and characters, to provide a certain tangible critique of external realities.

As for critique, this article argues that Slaughterhouse-Five is a postmodern critique of modernism’s literary exhaustion. The actual framework of the analysis will expose modern “used-up” literary modes and possible “replenishment” for such exhaustion. As such, narrative concepts will be applied to Slaughterhouse-Five in order to accentuate the postmodern narrative qualities of the novel and how they correspond to the spirit of “bildingstroman” generic literature. Slaughterhouse-Five, accordingly, is a postmodern inclusive recapitulation of modern fiction. Being so, it is written in a different literary manner. Thus, this article studies the novel as an experimental critique of modern literature. To put another way, it conducts a technical as well as a thematic study of the novel. Most importantly, the novel’s narrative structure critiques modern “exhausted possibilities”, yet the thematic aspects of the novel expose the real state of the American individual’s suffering after the Second World War. Therefore, the article interrogates why and how Slaughterhouse-Five functions in postmodern narrative discourse. Thus, the central argument of this study is Vonnegut’s critique of modern “used-up” literary modes to depict the American individual’s anguish at the time.

II. The Author as a Character in Slaughterhouse-Five

Self-reflexive fiction is the parodic deformation of a literary text. Textual defamiliarization is a radical means of literary experimentation. Furthermore, it is a process of deviation or the “transformation” of well established, formative literature in the progressive development of literary genres. Accordingly, the author can insert their parodic perspective into the text to emphasize a certain point of view regarding its thematic message. Parody, therefore, is the foundational element of self-reflexive fiction, whereby the author appears implicitly in the narrative textuality. Self-reflexive fiction parades “ideal standards whose deviation is to be satirically condemned in the work” (Hutcheon, 2000, p.78). In Slaughterhouse-Five self-reflexivity is clearly manifested through the author’s perspective in his text: “That was me. That was the author of this book” (p.160). It is apparent here that the author, Vonnegut, refers directly to himself, yet via a narrative point of view. The intrusion of the author into a text is a remarkable token of metafictional writing. Being a postmodern author, Vonnegut exemplifies the inherent mode of a postmodern critique of the existing reality. Further, he utilizes a narrative agent to accomplish this critique which constitutes a representative argument of metafictional writing. The accounts introduced into postmodern textuality call for a certain view of the ongoing reality. Postmodern textuality sets out to go beyond contemporary modern literature. Consequently, it interrogates the core of existing literature and its conventional textuality. The comprehensive and inclusive enterprise of postmodern literature examines the experimental techniques in modern literature and outpaces them through innovative experimentation. Hence, metafictional writing “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” (Waugh, 1984, p.2).
In the long run, metafictional writing sets a certain meaning behind the latent essence of the text, “in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (p.2).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* presumably, represents an authorial vision of contemporary modern literature. It includes various allusions to the “exhausted” sense of modern literary modes. There are multifarious references which accentuate the contemporary status of literature. There are a number of explicit expressions in the text referring to the construction of the text and its self-reflexive nature. It is obviously expressed in the narrator’s point of view that the novel is “new”. In a reference to Edgar Derby (a character in the novel), the author voices his own vision of the textual structure of the novel’s context. Most significantly, the narrator talks about the “climax” of the novel which entails the author’s self-reflexive mediation on the text. Here, the pronoun “I” explicitly expresses such self-reflexivity through a narrative point of view: “I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby” (p.14). Thus, the explicit reference to the textual structure of the “climax” is the author’s rather implicit emphasis on the importance of “executing Edgar Derby”, who is touted as the incarnation of the status of contemporary modern literature. In the main, metafictional self-reflexivity has inherent textual meaning and projects it via the author’s voice or visionary comments on his/her text. Nevertheless, the most viable positing of metafiction involves delving into a deep-seated craving for innovation and experimentation with the narrative devices within fictional texts. They circulate systematically in a methodologized or, to put it in Waugh’s terms, formulated autonomy, “providing a critique of their own methods of construction” (p.2). Obviously, the conspicuous meaning of metafictional writing lies at the heart of a critical proposal. Yet, critical appreciation of a certain literary aspect within the text should comprise a direct object of criticism. One major device of metafiction is a story questioning the peculiar traditions of fiction. Traditional conventions of telling stories are brought into the literary scene and questioned in terms of metafictional critiques. They pry into a more copious discovery of the probable “fictionality” present in reality and how this discovery is fictionally represented in the text.

The first principle of textual fictionality is parody. Therefore, self-conscious fiction draws attention to its own status. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* there is an evidently self-conscious comment on the text and its metafictional structure. Since the whole plot of the novel disseminates the tragic consequences of the burning of “Dresden”, the narrative construction of the plot exposes the parodic ironic implications of that catastrophic event following the attack on the city: “I’m writing this book about Dresden ... The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down” (italics in original) (p.15). Notwithstanding, the parodic irony is not all directed against the textual incorporation or absorption of other texts. However, it is a depiction of real tragic events which may only happen once to the author during his life. Speculation about the possible experience of the author finds sustenance in the lines of the story, which is now fictionally construed. The postmodern absorption of previous literary modes, especially that of modernism, is not a maturing of those modes. It is the all-encompassing recapitulation of previously deployed traditions of literature which are now of no use. Accordingly, the fictional construction of a postmodern text necessitates the “renovation” of previous literary works in the form of a fictional critique. A striking example from *Slaughterhouse-Five* correctly exemplifies the postmodern metafictional status. The repeatedly used conjunction “and” demonstrates the emphasis on experimental departure in postmodern texts, “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations” (p.21).

Furthermore, postmodern fictionality gropingly examines the innovative techniques used in fictional works. It is a replenishing process of what had been experimental in terms of literary imitation and is no longer experimental with the advent of postmodernism. Henceforth, the subjective fiction of postmodernism reveals a specific degree of representing reality in the course of literary structures. The representative self-reflexive potential of literary texts is seen in the intrusion and incorporation of a number of devices in them. Vonnegut is a practitioner of such literary representation as he amalgamates metafictional devices into the novel’s text. Besides the device of the story questioning the literary traditions of predecessors’ stories, there is another self-reflexive device. The device of the narrator revealing himself as the composer of the story is itself a discernable technique. Mark Currie’s assertion about the nature of authorial intrusion into a text is illustrative of this device. According to Currie (1995), the paramount project of this device is elucidation of the extent of “realism” and how it brings about the smouldering purpose of self-reflexive texts. And so the authorial consciousness of the technical construction of the text favours provocation of the intrinsic quality of the text. *Slaughterhouse-Five* accommodates different categorical hints to the author’s conscious knowledge of the work he writes.
In the following quotation, Vonnegut puts directly in the narrator's voice that he is purposefully writing the (novel) about a calamity that happened in Dresden; “Listen, I said, I’m writing this book about Dresden” (p.15). That being so, the authorial straightforward metafictional device manifests properly in the novel’s textuality.

III. Focalization Factor

The focalization factor is one of the most important techniques of narratology. It is studied within a narrative technique which impels the subversive style of narrative texts. Indeed, it is one of the factors which situate the narrative point of view from which the story is told. Focalization, like many other narrative elements, emanates from self-reflexive authorial intrusion in the text. Like metafiction, it carries the author's comments on the text in a perennial manner. However, it differs radically from metafiction in its “manipulation of the narrative point of view”. The focalization factor inserts a narrative element, critically scrutinized as the “ventriloquism effect”. This element precludes a narrative’s superficial denotative appreciation and emphasizes the intrinsic and undivided status of a text. Consequently, the ventriloquism effect produces a counter-effect, a discursive narrative point of view. Regardless of the narrative point of view, the ventriloquism effect potentially results in a mimetic representation of the narrative. In particular, it is all about the narrator who initiates the narrative. On the other hand, it entangles the textual “interference” of the narrative perspective with the narrative body. Nevertheless, the pivotal point of the ventriloquism effect culminates in its discursive contribution to the focalization factor. In the long run, the bravura performance of the focalization factor is the narrative perspective which investigates and ushers in the narrative point of view. The economic judgement of the focalization factor is the effective expression of the whole substance of the story.

Thus, the critical potential of focalization is a subtle agent which manipulates a normal event in the course of the plot to penetrate a rather abnormal event. In Slaughterhouse-Five, the main events are regularly recounted in an erudite stylistic manner. In contrast, they tell a story of extraordinary events happening in Dresden. This is obvious from a first glance at the initial statement of the novel: “All this happened, more or less” (p.1). The narrative voice, here, appears normal to the reader who may get immersed in reading the novel from the beginning. Yet, it is through a decisive narrative point that the story begins and gets into a whimsical event. The term focalization, nonetheless, is somewhat manipulative. While this manipulation is consciously produced, a self-reflexive comment appears on the surface of the novel’s exposition. The defensible mechanisms of the focalization factor are assessed as the “mediation” measure for the position of focalization. Only the focalization factor can specify the “prism” of the narrator’s verbalization of the main events. In the first place, the “true” and sincere account defends the specific position of the narrator. Vonnegut’s early comment on that position explains that: “The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (p.1). Focalization, thus, irresolutely comprises external and internal focalization. External and internal focalization categories are somewhat connected. As the story begins with the author’s account of events in Dresden, the plot revolves around the external (object of) focalization.

The external focalization is authoritative. Accordingly, the author is palpably interchangeable with the narrator. It is centrally described in terms of the narrative as one story from the exposition to the last revelation of the latent nuance of the plot. Thus, there is an object of focalization. Regarding events, they are appraised under internal focalization since they work intrinsically with other narrative elements. The focalization factor, therefore, is the subsequent setting of the narrative text. In the case of external focalization, the initiator of a focalization position is called a “focalizer”. The focalizer clarifies the narrative position where the narrative point of view is seen and expressed through the narrator’s account of the ongoing events in the course of the story. In Slaughterhouse-Five, the setting assimilates Dresden’s ambience after the Second World War. Again, metafictional implications appear in the introductory paragraphs about Dresden, when the narrator comments: “But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then - not enough of them to make a book” (p.18). The novel’s setting, thereupon, works internally on the level of the narrator who speaks about Dresden. It, hitherto, externally embodies an authoritative vision of the events happening in Dresden after the war. Therefore, the author’s vision is the focalizer who sees the events from a broad perspective. In the stylistic manner of focalization, there is an object of focalization that comes into play. The object of focalization is the novel’s spatial and temporal setting. The temporal setting is evident in Vonnegut’s recollection of his “memory” from the “past”, when “I [Vonnegut] think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about” (square brackets added) (p. 19).
On the other hand, the spatial setting is Dresden, Germany. From the very beginning, it is connected with the temporal setting of the novel, “I really do go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967” (italics in original) (p.2). Here, the connection of time and place is the broadest focalization object. These are thus connected to break away from the usual representation of a setting in fictional texts. As texts are narrated within a specific time period, place is the ground field for the time span. *Slaughterhouse-Five* avoids the usual appearance of a linear setting seen in modern literature. In contrast, the setting is initiated with time and place simultaneously. The object of focalization consolidates the technical aspects of *Slaughterhouse-Five* since it is constructed as a postmodern metafictional device. However, the strongest focalization object is the sense of literary exhaustion prevailing in the modern literary mode. It is, therefore, the intrinsic textual qualities which epitomize the author’s core meaning through textual discourse. The manipulation of the spatial and temporal setting is a focalizing experimental technique utilized by Vonnegut to conduct a critique of modern narrative modes.

IV. *Slaughterhouse-Five’s Narrative Discourse*

The conventions of fictional focalization are revealed in discourse. The relationship between self-reflexive fiction and the essence of the critical message encompasses the authorial perspective. The metonymic connotations of the authorial voice find their way into the author’s vision as projected into the speech of his/her characters in the text. Neither the characters nor the setting can solely convey the authorial vision. Indeed, they are vital manifestations of the author’s textual message. Yet, the text requires a pragmatic mode to adumbrate the author’s message. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, discourse manipulation appears in the characters’ interplay with the author’s vision. The allegorical protagonist Billy Bilgrim symbolizes actual events outside the text. The protagonist’s quest throughout the novel incarnates the author’s perennial depiction of the negative consequences of the Second World War, and how it affected the characters’ behaviours. The following excerpt illustrates the protagonist’s transformation in the course of the novel. He ceases to be benign as usual and uses threatening agents in the form of guns: “It was entirely Billy’s fault that this fighting organization no longer existed, Weary felt, and Billy was going to pay” (p. 48). As such, Billy’s weariness and angst are caused by the sequence of events during the bombing of Dresden. All the events imposed on him exemplify a certain look at the world which requires a different reaction.

The description of the protagonist’s actions is set out by the author’s capacity for dialogic relations. Such relations are subject to the author’s manipulation of the characters’ interactions in the text. Being a postmodern text, *Slaughterhouse-Five* introduces authorial intrusion into the text, seen in the way he controls his characters. This technique is commonly defined as “dialogism” in discourse studies. The whole textual interaction among the characters is given a voice for an ideological purpose, set by the author, through the positions of the characters in the text. In addition, the authorial position disappears and the actions are undertaken by characters who are authentically worked out according to the author’s ideology. In other words, the dialogic relation in the text is synonymously labelled polyphonic relations. Polyphony incorporates the author’s abstract ideological mode and portrays it through the characters’ interactions in the text. That being so, the author’s voice is given credit for not grasping at the text just from a unilateral or authorial perspective. In the course of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, warnings against the negative consequences of war are dialogically introduced. As the narrator recollects: “What the Englishman said about survival was this ‘If you stop taking pride in your appearance, you will very soon die’” (p.86). The Englishman’s threatening voice is not only a narrative device. It is an ideology that includes the author’s apocalyptic insinuations about the calamitous consequences of the war as it spills over into America and other parts of the world. Yet, in the novel, the entire issue of the threatening tone is aligned with the American position in the war, since the protagonist basically represents American individuality.

Additionally, the authorial voice is approached in terms of double-voiced discourse. Discourse categories and classifications are subject to the author’s voice. Nevertheless, the text plays an important role in determining the authorial position in the text. Furthermore, the text does not directly bring the author into play. It rather presents the textual voice and how this voice is initiated. Here, double-voiced vision appears as the text goes along, with the author’s abstract voice being concretized in the fictional context. And so, the most penetrative technique of double-voiced dialogism ascribes the author’s perspective to the textual scenario he/she depicts. Thus the text, and all its pertinent devices, is being drawn out through the main narrative voice. It is critically argued that the text’s main voice is the narrative point of view, where the narrative is initiated from a certain point in the text. From a double-voiced
narrative perspective, however, the authorial voice participates in the narrative to emphasize a specific ideology in postmodern fiction. In narratological terminology, the narrative-author interplay in the text is a fairly metafictional device. By the same token, *Slaughterhouse-Five* mixes an authorial abstract voice and enacts it in the text. Vonnegut's main concern is the inexorable consequences of the Second World War and how these demolished American individuality. This ideological concern finds its path through the text's representative technical qualities. When Billy leaves his room and wanders in the streets, he feels everything is normal. The normality of the entities around him does not represent the truth but a fake facade of the reality surrounding him. For example, the iconoclastic Statue of Liberty is a token of America's grandeur; but it is a fake since Billy looks at a model of the statue model instead of the real one; “In the window were hundreds of books about fucking and buggery and murder, and a street guide to New York City, and a model of the Statue of Liberty with a thermometer on it” (p. 106). Here, the symbolically depicted character (Billy Pilgrim) corresponds to Vonnegut's abstract voice. In the long run, double-voiced ideology manifests in Vonnegut's depiction of the American psyche after the Second World War.

**V. Conclusion**

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a postmodern recapitulation of modern and pre-modern literary modes. It is a reincarnation of postmodern self-reflexive fiction which conducts a critique of modern literature. In the broadest terms, the novel is ostensibly a fictional work exposing the tragic consequences of the Second World War. In particular, it is a depiction of the reality outside its textual structure. Contemporary narrative modes lack a certain contextuality as modern literature imitates the styles and techniques of previous literature. Henceforth, there is a new predilection in postmodernism to break away from modernism and its reliance on pre-existing literary modes. The main strategy favoured by postmodern writers is literary experimentation. Vonnegut, true to the spirit of postmodernism, uses fixed lucid experimental techniques which render him a writer of the zeitgeist. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he utilizes literary experimentation on the inherent techniques of the novel. This experimentation is carried out by changing how the novel deals with the narrative point of view, setting and characters. These basic narrative elements are monotonously imitated in modern literature. However, they are manipulated in Vonnegut's postmodern fictional text. Such manipulation proliferates within a postmodern relative vision of reality. The relative vision of reality in a postmodern context depends on the author's perspective of the current categorical changes of the time. Vonnegut exploits metafictional devices to introduce his critical opinion through the narrator in the course of the plot as a fictional interplay between the author's abstract vision and reality. In so doing, he provides a basis for perceiving the American individual's suffering after the Second World War.

**Notes**

1. As will be argued later, this study focuses only on the literary fiction of postmodernism.
2. This is, of course, metafictional terminology for the postmodern grand narrative in the 1960s.
3. Waugh's metafictional terms will be appropriated along with Genette and Bakhtin's narrative concepts.
4. These three concepts are going to be further developed in the study's textual analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
5. In the following sections, this concept will be cited through John Barth's twin critical essays: “The Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Literature of Replenishment”.
6. The coming-of-age story has been intensively approached in postmodern literature. In this article, I refer to it as postmodern terminology.
7. Narrative discourse is elaborated in section four to highlight the authorial voice which describes the reality outside the text.
9. Ibid. p.85.
13. Ibid. p.2.
23. Here, I will use external focalization to discuss Vonnegut’s experimental manipulation of the setting.
29. Ibid. p.87.
30. Micheal Holquist (1990), Bakhtin and his World, p.68.

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