

**POSTMODERNIST FEATURES IN  
KURT VONNEGUT'S  
"SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE"**

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Included in the category of the experimental novel, along with Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Mantissa*, or John Barth's *The Floating Opera*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is a novel which facilitates the study of Postmodernist elements within it. These elements become obvious even from the front page. Not only do we find a subtitle added to the title – *The Children's Crusade. A Duty-Dance with Death* – but we are also offered a short self-presentation of the writer, which makes no full sense to the reader. We learn about the 'subject' of the novel, *war*, the writer being "a prisoner of war", one that "witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany (...) and survived to tell the tale."<sup>1</sup> After this quite traditional way of presenting, or anticipating the subject, there come the last lines of the introduction, which completely baffle the reader:

This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Talfamadore, where the flying saucers come from.  
Peace.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, the reader is confused and, more importantly, he has no idea what the novel will be about. The only thing he is sure of is that it is going to be something out of the ordinary. The 'alien' will thus be the subject of the book or, at least, the way it is presented. Only at the end of the novel will the reader be capable of making some sense and decoding some of these ideas.

*The focus on the process of writing is one of the most important features in Postmodernism, and the novel strongly draws on this idea, the*

*book presenting the adventure of writing its story. The last part of the introductory presentation tells us something about the way the novel is built. Thus, we expect it to be written in the form of a 'telegram', a collage of short texts, memories and happenings of war, put together, in a 'schizophrenic' way, at random and without any obvious chronological or logical connection between them.*

The focus on the writing of the book continues in the first chapter, which presents the struggle of gathering the material and of putting it in the right form, as in a laboratory of the story, so that the world would find out about the true face of war. The writer feels the need for a justification:

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 about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty the writer had to face was that of not finding the right words, of not knowing exactly how to present his ideas in the most suggestive way:

But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then – not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.

I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about.<sup>4</sup>

And this difficulty arose, maybe, from his desire of presenting the unpresentable, the war in its true reality:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.<sup>5</sup>

However, the writer wanted to speak and the only way of doing this was the mixture of the unrepresentable and the common place. Thus, the atrocities and the brutality of war, the blood and the death of so many people mingle with insanity (Billy Pilgrim's schizophrenic war story), delirium (Billy's stories about aliens and the planet Tralfamadore) and apparently normal scenes from the hero's personal life.

In this process of writing and continuous invention, which is one of the subjects in the novel and we follow the writer in his meetings with old veteran war-friends; we find out what the supposed climax ("the execution of poor old Edgar Derby") is, what the beginning ("Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time"), the ending ("Poo-tee-weet?"), and the title ("I'll call it 'The Children's Crusade'") of the book mean.

The hero of the story is not, as we expected, the writer, but Billy Pilgrim, whose mental voyages and travels back and forth in time reiterate his initiation voyage through life, which includes the most obsessive of his experiences. Among them war is most important. To this effect, the writer employs a very important Postmodernist technique: the annihilation of time. There is no time at all in the novel, but a mixture of decades, the present mingling with the past and the future. The narrative also mingles with the temporal and spatial, so that there is no continuous flowing of time or of story. The narrative is broken into little narratives, the traditional grand-narrative being transformed into autonomous micro-narratives. Thus, instead of following a single story, we deal with several stories at the same time: the war-story, which is the dominant, the science-fiction story of the abduction by aliens, which is the result of insanity, schizophrenia and SF reading, and the 'real' story, set in the 'present' of 1967. We identify a plurality of intermingling universes, some possible and other impossible, some real and other unreal.

*The multiplied reality thus obtained is caused by a multiple individual consciousness, which implies high degrees of subjectivity in knowing the world. Because consciousness is fragmented and the self is split, the focus is on the inside of the mind. Consequently, schizophrenia, or the splitting*

*personality present in the text accounts for the fact that reality mixes with fiction in a chaotic and delirious way. A hyperreality is thus created. We have two or three stories undergoing at the same time, and even the writer sometimes feels the need to utter that something is true or not: "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. (...) I've changed all the names." <sup>6</sup> There is a continuous trespassing between these worlds, which is achieved by Billy's leaps or time-travel back and forth, out from the war story and back into it. The writer employs ingenious techniques and methods of passing from a state, from a story to another one, among which the predominant is the dream, followed by morphine, the turning out of the lights, time warps, dizziness and door passage. In these leaps, the character crosses the real writer - Vonnegut - twice, and he marks his presence:*

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

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.<sup>7</sup>

and,

(...) Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, "Oz." That was I. That was me.<sup>8</sup>

*All this creates confusion and the misleading of the reader, who is trapped in this series of fictional worlds and cannot tell the difference between fiction and reality. The only story he perceives as being 'real' is the war story, presenting the travel of the American prisoners of war to Dresden, the period of time spent in Slaughterhouse Five, the bombing of the city and the come back home. The one he knows to be 'unreal' is the science fiction story of Billy's experience on Tralfamadore. In between, nothing is clear or will become clear. In the end, the reader cannot understand or decode the novel fully. He knows that it deals with an important event, probably the one*

*that caused the splitting of personality. Everything is built around this moment - the bombing of Dresden - but there are still things that cannot be decoded as they are created by a schizophrenic mind without any rules or logic.*

Another postmodernist feature which is also present in *Slaughterhouse Five* is the fact that the text is not only one of self-reflection, but also one of cross-connection. We identify in the novel a lot of elements of intertextuality, appearing as a collage of different scenes and excerpts from different domains: literature, science fiction, science, songs, classical music, or newspaper articles. All these elements are rotated, and some of them appear twice in the text. Such an example is “the quatrain from the famous Christmas carol” that is used as the “epigraph of this book”, and reappears later on in the novel:

The cattle are lowing,  
The Baby awakes.  
But the little Lord Jesus  
No crying He makes.<sup>9</sup>

Another one is the prayer that appears both on Billy’s desk and on Montana Wildhack’s necklace: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference.”<sup>10</sup>

Among all these selections of texts, the science fiction story occupies an important place. Being introduced as the most bizarre and ‘unreal’ of the stories in the book, it permits the writer some important considerations on time, human nature and writing. Moreover, Vonnegut employs the majority of these ideas Billy pretends to have found in Kilgore Trout’s novels in writing this novel. Thus, the Tralfamadorian belief that “all time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all (...) bugs in amber”<sup>11</sup>, is applied in the novel, where we have a continuous voyage back and forth between the present and many pasts, and where the character

realises that everything in his life is and will always be the same, “because among things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future.”<sup>12</sup> This includes his death, which he has seen during his time travel. Thus, “I, Billy Pilgrim – he said – will die, have died, and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976.”<sup>13</sup>

The writing of literature, as seen on Tralfamadore also accounts for the formula used in the structure of this novel:

There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. *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.*<sup>14</sup>

This is the model Vonnegut tries to apply in the novel, and this explains the technique of fragmentation, the accumulation of short fragments of stories, which are always separated by series of dots between them, and which are often interrupted or stopped with a stereotype formula: “So it goes.”

All of Billy's readings combine in his mind, resulting in a mixture of reality and fiction until the reader can no longer tell the difference between them. In this way, Billy lives the life of the character in the science fiction novel, and he explains life through the books he has read. The science fiction story is thus important because it facilitates the writer a discussion about peace - the hidden message of the book - and war and a criticism on the senseless humans' need for war:

How the inhabitants of a whole planet can live in peace! As you know, I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time. (...) Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe! If

other planets aren't now in danger from Earth, they soon will be. (...) *The idea of preventing war on Earth is stupid.*<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, we can say that in reading *Slaughterhouse Five* we witness a Postmodernist process of alienation from reason, history and time, of repudiation and subversion of convention and artistic form, of exploration of ecstasy, trance and other extreme states of feeling, of turning of the consciousness in upon itself and, last but not least, of the intense awareness of imminent Apocalypse - the bombing of Dresden.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, Delta, New York, 1999, p.III

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. V ; 252

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77; .267

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.180

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112 (italics mine)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148 (italics mine)