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Metafictional Narratives with Self-Reflection: A Critical Study in Kurt Vonnegut's
Slaughterhouse-Five

Abstract: This paper demonstrates the operational mechanism of narrative in metafiction with self-reflection taking Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five as example. It seeks to provide answers to charges of metafiction's tendentious self-reflexivity and suggest how this so-called tendentiousness is in fact a strategy to re-vitalize an apparently flaccid tradition of fiction. Vonnegut is concerned fundamentally with problems of value: self-awareness, self-realization, and self-fulfillment; the nature and destiny of man. It shows how self-reflexivity not only warrants a narrative structure impervious to conventions of reading fiction, but also adopts an involuntarily disjunctive aesthetic at various levels.

Keywords: Narrative, Metafiction, Self-Reflexivity, Schizophrenic, Deconstruct

Kurt Vonnegut is an archetypal postwar writer who regards himself with the mysterious, disreputable and often nightmarish features of modern American life. He is regarded to be a renowned American novelist who enjoys the largest readership. As an author, Vonnegut's primary concern is not so much in the depiction of external events as in the search of those contravening emotional overtones which comprise the darker side of human nature and determine man's inhumanity. Vonnegut writes about the most restlessly painful things including our most distressing fears of automation and the bomb, our inmost political guilt, our menacing hatreds and our most repressive angst which are all a byproduct of modern culture barrenness of any moral insight. As an ex-prisoner of war and having encountered the revulsions of death and manslaughter when life amounted to nothing during the holocaust, he could make it back to America, a country that he would begin criticising openly. Thus, war becomes a leitmotif in his creative endeavours.

The Dresden massacre in the Second World War is a most climacteric moment in the life of Vonnegut's. It is the embryo of the narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which updates and oversees its various strands. As the victim of historical schizophrenia, Vonnegut is in fact the optimal mouthpiece for the strange dementia of his times. Vonnegut attains a new height of reputation through this novel. In his postmodern rendition of the most disastrous massacre in American history - thousands of people massacred in a single night in Dresden - Vonnegut expresses his own traumatic experience during the war. There is no chance to reduce the novel to a plain and simple plot. He himself performs multiple roles both as author and character, creator and creature, making centre-stage at the opening and end and also playing as a Dresden prisoner of war. The novel ends up as a renowned artefact, something that the reader holds in their hands right now. His remarks which open the novel are not plainly a foreword but a central part of the novel. Keeping him inside the novel is one way he can avoid the conventional styles and structures of fake emotion and fake writing from

interrupting the silence, and streamlining the unspeakable. References to himself found both the presence of his own narrative voice and the way by which he replaces his story into fantasy. Thus the interrelation between Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim is presented not to be simply autobiographical. Billy's narrative may not be Vonnegut's tale; it may be the story of his imagination. Billy's story is an odyssey within the novel's fragmented narrative structure - a structure made of time-shifts and structural displacements, drawing on the methods of his earlier science-fiction but only partially availed for by its 'time-travel' conventions, for these are journey of the imagination. As for Vonnegut's story it may include some experiences shared with people like Billy, but it is really much more. It is the writing of a novel that finds a new connection between the world of the real and that of the psyche, creating a world through its power to imagine and articulate.

Vonnegut fixes himself at the core of each succeeding fictional writings. The real-life author is living within the novel as the story's principal character in the first and final chapter and as a person who appears three times within the action that surfaces in chapters two to nine. Hardly an author has placed himself in the current stream of hallucinatory narrative while maintaining his or her own historical existence as a compositional factor. This features his readers with an experience quite different from the process they might be expected to endure. The person who shows-up at the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the real Vonnegut. Autobiographical elements in this novel are comparable to the reader's own life, for most of Vonnegut's experiences seem to be a familiar story from America's middle-class.

The telegraphic, schizophrenic style of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is focused on the character Billy. There is a panthology of nature in Billy's incompetence to differentiate reality from illusion, in his creation of another self and another world that permits him to live in this world and yet apart from it. The telegraphic style of the narration is due to Billy's erratic travelling in time: Vonnegut has so structured his tale that the reader should

experience an erratic narrative lacking in the expected chronological sequence in order to come to understand the psychological, imaginative life of a character that cannot bear to encounter his actual life.

Vonnegut employs a variety of narrative voices. The narrative is telegraphic in the sense that Vonnegut's different narrative voices connotes several directives and the reader should re-discover why and to what impact he intends in this complicated mode. The narrative mode is schizophrenic because the sender of the directives is a disintegrated self whose metaphysical clash drives him to interact with others from the opposite poles of his mind. Indeed, there are two narrative voices: a third-person omniscient narrator who narrates Billy's life-story and an unbiased narrator who documents Billy's imaginative life as Billy has disclosed it to the narrator. Other voices are also listened to, for example, the first-person voice which is the actual voice of the author, and the protruding first-person voice that exclaims: "I was there" (90). The impact of two of the interruptions is to introduce the author into the narration as a character whose actions are documented in the third person by the narrator. "That was I. That was me. That was author of this book" (Slaughterhouse-Five 109). Another narrative voice can be perceived as an authorial, editorial voice periodically remarking on Billy. The reader can sense, a presence is throughout the novel, a permeating creative presence to whom one should ascribe the structural motif - some quite subtle, others assertive - that because of their ubiquity and prominence make one conscious of a dominating hand conceiving the wholeness of the novel. The impersonation created by this hard-to-define presence is that in this evidently unpredictable, even unconventional novel, nothing is irrelevant, fanciful or quizzical: every factor is elemental and is in its appropriate position. The author reminds one that he is experiencing a meticulously wrought object that only superficially seems to be chaotic and dissonance.

Each of these voices is Vonnegut's, and each has a discrete purpose. The narrator

documents Billy's life from 1922 to mid 1968. By ascribing the imaginary life of time-travel and Tralfamadore to Billy - "He says" - this narrative voice differentiates the imaginary from the real life of Billy. Thus these narrative voices serve to forge Billy's schizophrenia. They allow the author to structure the narrative in such a manner that readers are enforced to experience the illusory life of his conceived character, to travel intermittently in time with Billy and to be deterred to Tralfamadore from Earth with him so that they will understand Billy's attitude and the condition that created it.

The first-person voice creates a complicated relationship between the conceived character and the author, complication in both associates and dissociates Billy and Vonnegut. By intervening into the narrative, the author connects himself with Billy by proposing that he endures essentially the same experiences as Billy's from his influx on the war front to the conclude the war. Indeed both Billy and Vonnegut are not totally disconnected. A close, spiritual bond among them is signified in sporadic traces of imagery and in conspicuous proximity. Vonnegut attempts to create relation with Billy, to bring to him their shared memories. He is attempting to get in touch with his spiritual affinity, with the self within, that likes to quit from life, from its revulsions and its responsibilities, to take off with Billy to Tralfamadore, where life is virtuous. When strange thoughts transpire to Billy Vonnegut interferes to claim that he shares the psychic life of Billy: "It would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim and for me too" (Slaughterhouse-Five 105). Accordingly Vonnegut engages spiritually in the fanciful life engendered from Billy's metaphysical requirements. Vonnegut is accentuating that pole of a cleft mind that is earnestly intrigued to an honest fatalism that can absolve him of all burdens, liberate him from his own life and admit him to drown faintly into the mental blankness of bantling innocence. Vonnegut's schizophrenia is reflected in the differentiation between the narrative-voices in which he discusses. The creative existence affirms that Vonnegut the author and human manage a critical receptiveness to the oddity and

aptitudes of his Billy - self that protects his mental health.

Vonnegut keeps himself within his novel as a form of neglecting conventional styles and structures from infringing on the ingenious source he dreams to feature. Its core is that it is ineffable; in attempting to talk about such brutalities, earlier novels have executed what must be an elemental barrenness with all kinds of fake feeling and fake writing. In his original thoughts about conceiving such a story Vonnegut professes to envisioning heroic proportion for himself and his companions for these have been the intersections he would see in earlier war fiction. As a demonstration to his own integrity as an author, his novel neglects to let itself be written this manner. In time the act of struggle becomes its entity, but here the plan is more than just metafictional narrative with self-reflection. Due to the personal interest he takes to his source, Vonnegut endures to remain both inside and outside of his narrative, interplaying with the characters he has conceived yet still standing above them - not in proximity to them as their creator but according to the readers as the author of the story they are reading. In essence, he works to control all three facets of the fictional endeavour: writing, reading and the narration by which writer and reader face each other.

In the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut sums up his Dresden experience and narrates how tough it is to write about it. In the end, he concludes both his fictional actions and his own act of writing it, finally connecting the two acts by mourning the death of Robert Kennedy and then retracing to the bombing's impact in Dresden, where he himself meets Billy and the other characters as carcass-diggers. In the novel, eight middle chapters, he has also appeared three times on the action's verge - ailing in a latrine, seeing a captured American Colonel attempting to find his troops and commenting on the un-bombed city of Dresden. Thus, he conceives a multidimensional narrative with three focal points: the person who actually encountered these incidents in history, the person who has strived to write about them for over two decades until discovering a method to conceive the narrative of Billy, and

eventually the person who now eventually ends the novel, a work incorporating the history of human accomplishment that now, also includes the fresh news that Robert Kennedy has demised.

As a part of Vonnegut's technique is to deconstruct the earlier form of what passed for human behaviour beginning with the revered doctrines on which America is discovered. Vonnegut picks the most popular texts and shows how their meanings are not at all inherent but have rather been habituated by sustained cultural practice their preconceived truths being nothing but harmonious inferences. The personal connection of Vonnegut with his story now outright, for it involves not just indigenous characters, scenes and values, nor just his speaking about his own work in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* but his active presence within the text itself, not as a participating character, but as the personally accountable and compassionate creator of all that happens - as the God.

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