

Review

So it goes: A postmodernist reading of Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five

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The paper offers a postmodernist reading of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to verify the long-debated premise that postmodernism really departs from and even challenges the modernist philosophy. The state of epistemological skepticism that throws its shadows on our cognitive apparatus challenges the rationalist ideals; and the state of ontological uncertainty – both intratextually and extratextually – questions the claims of modernism as far as homogeneity, sound meaning and credible representation of the world are concerned. The focal point of this paper is examining Vonnegut's concretization of the postmodernist theory in writing “an anti-war book” based on his personal experience as a prisoner of war in the second world war. Vonnegut has attempted to blend this serious theme in *Slaughterhouse-Five* with science fiction and humor. Through the choice of his protagonist – Billy Pilgrim – and the manipulation of various postmodernist techniques, Vonnegut exposes the atrocities of wars by uncovering the heroic façade by which nations mask their real intentions in launching wars, and manifests the moral vacuum that characterizes postwar western societies.

Key words: Postmodernism, American novel, anti-war literature, Vonnegut.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper seeks a thorough interpretation of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) in the light of postmodernism. The major concern of the paper is to read *Slaughterhouse-Five* within the framework of postmodernist thought where the position of man in the world is questioned, his cognitive apparatus is subject to many challenges, and his ontological orientation is suffering a deadlock. The novel is studied as a text that unfolds back on itself and announces the death of its author in spite of the fact that an autobiographical element is striving hard to find its place. The text is further tackled as a network in which elements of contingency and indeterminacy pose a question mark for

a long established modernist heritage.

Slaughterhouse-Five is not simply a fictional narrative created by its author; it is rather a representation of a real experience that Vonnegut had actually lived. Kurt Vonnegut belonged to an originally German family that had tried to maintain close ties to Germany. Following the First World War in which the United States allied itself with Britain against Germany, German Americans were asked to break their ties with Germany to prove their patriotism.

This anti-German feeling bred in the United States after the First World War, dimmed the Vonnegut family's business and pride as prominent members in the German

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Indianapolis society. This sense of loss frequently appears in Vonnegut's writing. He was then taken as a soldier in the Second World War, and during the battle of the bulge, which was the largest American defeat in the second world war, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans and taken as a prisoner of war. As a POW he was shipped to Dresden, a beautiful German city where he and his fellow prisoners were put in a slaughterhouse. On the night of 13 February, 1945 this beautiful city was completely destroyed leaving behind 135000 deaths to mark the largest massacre in European history, which was never declared as such. It was in 1969, 24 years after the Dresden massacre, and the year when the war in Vietnam reached its peak, that Kurt Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He was disappointed to see his country as "a nation that has betrayed its founding principles of democracy, freedom, justice and opportunity for all" (Marvin, 2002), and got involved in such a bloody war that added to countless wars preceding and yet to come. This triggered him to publish "an anti-war book" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 3) based on his personal experience as a prisoner of war in the Second World War.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a magnification of the escalating inhuman cruelty that has spread in postwar Western societies, and the moral vacuum characterizing contemporary life. Through the choice of his protagonist and the manipulation of various postmodern techniques, Vonnegut exposes the atrocities of wars through exposing the heroic façade by which nations mask their real intentions in launching wars. Billy Pilgrim's story is a parody of the sacredness associated with Pilgrimage. It is a non-heroic, meaningless pilgrimage that juxtaposes Western grand narratives in which wars have long been glorified. Through the historiographic metafiction presented in the narrative, Vonnegut shatters the continuum of history, the temporal and epistemological structures to recreate a long-last sense of the human. In other words, Vonnegut "shatters the teleology of narrative in order to emphasize the epistemic, ontological, and temporal rupture of warfare, simultaneously re-inventing narrative in order to re-invent the human" (Taylor, 2013).

Postmodernism: A continuum or a rupture

Postmodernism is a dominant philosophical approach that questions the totality and homogeneity of both rationalist and humanist doctrines. The primary concern of the rationalist philosophies and theories has been to establish the essentiality of the homogeneity of the 'meaning' delivered and a transcendental subject who is the producer of this homogeneous 'meaning'. In this wide realm of thought, various attempts were made starting

with the theological enterprise of the 15th century, passing through Descartes' rationalist philosophy of the 17th century. With the advent of the 20th century and the fall of the idea of the 'internal light of reason', intellectual discontinuity and cultural ruptures began to dominate the intellectual arena and, further, to question the fake homogeneity that is the core of the rationalist enterprise.

Some critics as David Harvey argue that "there is more continuity than difference in the movement from modernism to postmodernism" (Hawthorn, 1992). A scrutinizing look at the postmodernist thought, however, marks the radical turn that took place in the human method of reasoning. Discontinuity has replaced the Hegelian totality, and dispersal of meaning among infinite possibilities has nullified the credibility of homogeneous meaning advocated by the structuralists. In the modernist philosophy, the central question is one of order, thus implying the repletion of grand narratives for the sake of establishing homogeneity and order. For the modernists, the individual is the unit of value; he is the autonomous rational 'Subject' who is able to assert his freedom and individualism. This underlining idea of a Subject endowed with the ability to question by his intellectual faculties the previously proposed premises, emerged with the writings of Bacon, Decartes and Kant. Unlike modernism which finds ground in the totalizing theory, postmodernism bases its arguments on the insights of the chaos theory. It advocates heterogeneity and diversity rather than modernist homogeneity.

The term 'postmodernism' emerged in the 1960s to cope with and reflect the radical changes which have been projected on the nature of knowledge since World War II. The importance of postmodernist studies lies in their role in directing our attention "to the changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture" (Sarup, 1993). Featherstone argues that postmodernism suggests "an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organizing principles" (1991). Postmodernism is a comprehensive philosophical and cultural movement that rejects the modernist philosophy fundamentally as a reaction to the paradox between its advocated premises and their cultural manifestations: "while the modern world continues to speak of reason, freedom and progress, its pathologies tell another story" (Hicks, 2004). Postmodernists repudiate the grand narratives of Hegel and Marx, and any form of universal or teleological philosophy. They believe that such a 'holistic' vision is unattainable and nonexistent. What characterizes the postmodern culture is fragmentation of all disciplines: fragmentation of language, discourse, time, space and the human subject itself. Hence, postmodernist characteristics include endless interpretation of all truths, skepticism and blurring of the lines of reality.

This anti-foundational approach has drawn its essence from the works of philosophers and thinkers such as Nietzsche, Foucault and Lyotard who radically vilify the western paradigm of thinking. Their anti-humanist philosophy fundamentally deconstructs western metaphysics that has long tended to pose generalizations, and presents a critique of the western culture that tries to pursue its role of being the unquestionable originator while clearly conscious of "its own cultural "relativization" (Young, 1993). Nietzschean philosophy highlights the fact that all western humanistic disciplines are victimized by their 'will to truth', arguing that truth - as corresponding to reality- is nonexistent; it is mere illusion created for maintaining stability among people. As for Foucault, his main concern is the marginalized groups who have been excluded from political power through a set of 'differences' that have long suppressed their right to freedom.

According to him, "history is not the progress of universal reason [but rather] the play of rituals of power, humanity advancing from one domination to another" (Dreyfus et al., 1982). It is with Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) that the ways of legitimating knowledge in contemporary societies are examined. Legitimizing knowledge in the Enlightenment was tied to what Lyotard calls 'grand narratives'. His attack on the 'grand narratives' lies in its essence on his belief that "we can no longer talk about a totalizing idea of reason for there is no reason, only reasons" (Sarup, 1993). Lyotard thus refutes this form of narrative for being "the principle way in which a culture or collectivity legitimates itself in a demanding tautology" (Connor, 1997).

In the postmodern condition, "literature, art, and theory are all part of the same incoherence and meaninglessness" (Hogan, 2000). Postmodern literature is primarily an outcome and a reflection of the movement's ideologies and theories. It is a reaction against the Enlightenment and modernist approaches to literature, and is characterized by heavy reliance on techniques that reflect its ideological context like fragmentation, paradox and unreliable narrators. It is the outcome of the fall of metaphysics, the collapse of the system of morality, the death of man, the dispersal of meaning, and the destabilization of all structures from within themselves. These postmodernist characteristics will further unfold in the course of the analysis of the novel under study.

Hence, postmodernism is undeniably an outcome of modernism, but as a rejection of the modernist thought rather than a continuum. While in the modernist context, the individual is stuck amidst a totalizing web of social forces that tend to dichotomize roles and therefore is relegated to role-taking in this global homogeneity, in the postmodernist context, roles are never stable; they take

the form of negative dialectics. The postmodern 'self' is a decentered entity left adrift in an ambivalent meaningless world. Studied against this background, *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a postmodernist novel presents man's dilemma within the postmodernist web. The characters presented, the techniques used and the issues dwelt upon, all shatter the modernist totalitarian argument. Vonnegut, as well as his protagonist, emblemizes this postmodern 'decentered' self entangled in a chaotic, meaningless context. Drawing clear lines between modernism and postmodernism is thus, an essential importance when the latter is to be applied to literary texts.

All this happened, more or less: *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a historiographic metafiction

It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both (Hutcheon, 1996).

Writing about the past has been and will always remain a problematic issue, since the representation of history mainly depends on the perspective of the beholder. Therefore, historiography can never present a true or an original image of the past; but rather a copy. The term "historiographic metafiction" was introduced by Linda Hutcheon in her essay "historiographic metafiction: Parody and the intertexts of History" (1989). According to Hutcheon, postmodern fiction "suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present" (1996). Works of 'historiographic metafiction' self-consciously "distort history" (Sim, 1998), by playing upon "the truth and lies of the historical record" (Hutcheon, 1996). Hutcheon's concept thus echoes Foucault who asserts that "the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (Foucault, 1977).

Slaughterhouse-Five is intentionally a fictional representation of a real historical event – the firebombing of Dresden by allied forces. The story of the Dresden massacre has been known for the world in the way it was documented; a way that would always glamorize the role played on behalf of the powerful. However, as a postmodernist author, Vonnegut writes the novel with the intention of uncovering the minor stories blurred through the discourse used in the process of historiographic representation, and hence deconstructing the façade masking many American institutions while reconstructing history. In his attempt to recapture this moment of 'rupture', Vonnegut applies Brechtian 'estrangement

effect' to defamiliarize the reader with the grand narrative and challenge him into a process of re-evaluation of the self, history, and the world. According to Brooker, this technique is used to "[strip] the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and [create] a sense of astonishment and curiosity" about it (1994). Vonnegut's motif is initially stated in the opening semi-autobiographic chapter of the novel:

All this happened, more or less, the war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 1).

Throughout the novel, actual historical events are described while being problematized through the intrusion of science fiction, the self-conscious presence of the narrator and the use of nonlinear narration. The Tralfamadorians and their concept of time juxtapose both Pilgrim and Vonnegut's inability to tear themselves off the historical web. Both the author and his creation are unable to attain what Nietzsche has rejected and referred to as "amor fati". This concept of 'amor fati' resignates to the teleological view of history; historical events are inevitably true, but escaping them is possible. The great importance and magnification that is characteristic of dealing with such crucial world events is juxtaposed by highlighting the triviality of the cause if compared to its outcome.

The reader is taken into a historical tour that blends various seemingly-unrelated historical events together; the story of Adam and Eve, of Lot and his wife, the children's crusade (the subtitle of the novel), the world wars, and other incidents that are related to sin and resurrection. These all blend together to represent history as a non-chronological repetition of endless signifiers that lead to no signifieds. All human actions are related somehow and they all refer to and explain one another. Thus, Vonnegut's novel is an attempt to shake the totalizing grounds that hold history intact.

Slaughterhouse-Five furthermore underlines the crucial role played by fiction in the postmodern world. In a conversation between Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater – Pilgrim's next-bed patient in the hospital - Vonnegut reveals the key concept of the novel: Both characters are victims of World War II, and both find solace outside the realm of historical reality. While Pilgrim resorts to time-travel as an unconscious means of refuting the teleological historical scheme, Rosewater finds his refuge in the literature of Kilgore Trout – a sci-fi author. In this concern, Rosewater suggests that fiction helps post-modern individuals to "re-invent themselves and their universe" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 82) in an attempt to create any meaning out of this chaotic meaninglessness.

Ontological uncertainty and the absence of textual autonomy

In postmodern literature, the text's self autonomy together with the author's assumed authority is deconstructed. These fixed notions are put 'under erasure'. The postmodernist author echoes the ontological uncertainty that pervades the postmodern context. He "distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with the traditional stories, and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative" (Sim, 1998). A postmodern text never experiences "fictional [or] linguistic autonomy"; it rather reflects upon itself and its own "process of production" (Juan-Navarro, 2000). It is a 'text' that deconstructs itself. Slaughterhouse-Five initially opens with:

"All this happened more or less" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 1) to minimize the certainty of the narrated events, and to render the novel itself an embodiment of the age's uncertainty and meaninglessness.

The self-conscious presence of Vonnegut himself in his own creation is meant to shatter the claim of the author's authority over his text. The author himself acts as "a transworld identity between the real world and the fictionalized" one (Hooti, 2011). As one of the prominent and prolific postmodernist writers, Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse-Five provides the reader with "plenty of clues about the connection between his life and work by weaving autobiographical details" with fictional ones (Marvin, 2002). Chapter one exists outside the central narrative, providing an autobiographical account of the origins of the text and the "process of [its] writing" (Marvin, 2002). This narrative technique adopted by Vonnegut intensifies the difficulty of reconstructing the history of this traumatic past.

Vonnegut's technique is emblematic of the post-modernist conception of the absent author. This mode of writing gives space for the reader to analyze and dissect the world in an attempt to reconstruct it. Undercutting his authority as the 'father' of the text, Vonnegut renders a demystification of a world void of meaning and homogeneity and at the same time distances himself from this Dresden massacre to enable himself to transfer his suffering into art. There are three major occurrences for Vonnegut in the novel; first, on the wedding day of Pilgrim's daughter, he answers the phone, and on the other side there appears a speaker who "Billy could almost smell his breath-mustard gas and roses" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 60). The second instance, when Pilgrim enters the latrine, he is described as standing next to an American man who "wailed that he has excreted everything but his brains.... That was I. That was

me. That was the author of the book” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 103). Also, when Pilgrim and his comrades reach Dresden as POWs, a description of the scene runs as follows: “Somebody behind [Billy] in the boxcar said, ‘oz’. That was I. That was me” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 122). This recurrent appearance of the narrator in the events blurs the lines between the author and his creation. Furthermore, by drawing attention to its mode of production and to “the plurality of worlds”, the text “destabilizes the projected world” of the literary work itself (McHale, 1992) rendering the novel a metafictional narrative reflecting the ontological uncertainty characterizing postwar America.

Death of the modernist subject

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” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 50). The postmodern context has given birth to a lost postmodernist ‘self’ deprived and robbed of the free will to determine or rather to understand the nature of his position. Pippin describes this postmodern dilemma saying:

We have degenerated into creatures who can will to do only what all others are willing to do, and this is primarily out of fear and a timid hesitation about the consequences of any full realization of the contingency and the plurality of human ends (1999).

In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche announces the advent of the age of the last man. This last man is the postmodern ‘self’ that is “paralyzed by [the] recognition of the contingency of all beliefs” (Levine, 1995). He is ontologically uncertain, and is constantly subject to ambivalent events that shake the whole corpus of moral values he believes in and abides by. As for Foucault, the postmodern man is no more the transcendental subject that can induce a change depending on the power of his intellect, but rather a powerless ‘self’ that is constantly open to transformation by other forces.

Slaughterhouse-Five materializes the postmodernist attempt at and failure to grasp a meaning in the uncertain and incomprehensible twentieth century context. Billy Pilgrim can be viewed as an absurd character portrayed as an “isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe”; into the ambiguous human life “as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end” (Abrams, 1988). The novel emblemizes Vonnegut’s own doubt in free will. In the framing arc of Pilgrim’s story, Vonnegut expresses his own dilemma as a postmodernist ‘self’ who is stuck within the

meaningless, fake western life on one side and his ineradicable memories on the other. His war memories never leave him. Through these memories the hidden traumas of life are constantly revealed to him despite his inability to reveal them to others. This causes him a partial loss of contact with reality. Vonnegut reveals himself as being trapped within the Western grand narratives and the fake claims of possessing free will and rightful causes. Taking part in the war has placed him within the postmodernist dilemma that deprives the individual of possessing a coherent sense of self.

Billy Pilgrim – like the era he represents – suffers paranoid anxieties, which include “the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others” (Sim, 1998). He is emblematic of the postmodernist ‘will to power’ and is deprived of the power to choose. Pilgrim’s actions are always reactions to the pressures the outside world poses upon him. Throughout his life, Pilgrim is unwillingly forced into roles that he does not choose: a soldier, a husband to a wife he does not love, an employer,...etc. in spite of being neither mentally nor physically fit to be a soldier, Pilgrim finds himself “drafted for military service in the Second World War” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 19), taken as a POW, and witnessing a massacre that leads him to a partial loss of control over his mind. More tragically, Billy Pilgrim is not only deprived of the ability to decide the course of his life, he is even unable to predict which part of it he will be living next:

“He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 19).

Billy Pilgrim will end his life without reaching any answers. In a conversation between him and a Tralfamadorian, the Tralfamadorian dwells upon this issue of free will, saying:

If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings...I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will’. I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will (Slaughterhouse-Five, 70).

Billy Pilgrim’s name is itself an allegoric reflection on the postmodernist “pilgrimage through the meaninglessness of life, the randomness of existence, the chaos that symbolizes the unknown” (Sieber, 2000). Billy Pilgrim is essentially an avert parody of John Bunyan’s Christian in Pilgrim’s progress. The novel is a “pilgrim progress turned around, in which... Billy Pilgrim does not move

toward heaven. Instead, [he] loses his soul, his innocence, his psychic balance" (McKean, 1969). This grand narrative –through the choice of Billy Pilgrim's name – is deconstructed and questioned by Vonnegut. The Western legacy of man's ability to attain salvation is 'put under erasure' in such a bare postmodern wasteland in which the individual's pilgrimage is towards nothingness and chaos.

Pilgrim's powerlessness to control his world or rather his own life is projected in various ways in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. One of these ways is the juxtaposition established between this lack of control and the 'serenity prayer' which is hung on his office wall and worn by his Earthly mate:

"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" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 50).

Paradoxically, Billy Pilgrim is deprived of possessing a self; for as being "a bug trapped in amber" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 63), he is forcibly bound to history and time. Billy Pilgrim is in a constant attempt to create a shield; a different world rather than the lived one. This shield is his battered mind which is his only way out. The catastrophe Pilgrim has experienced in Dresden has violently destroyed his ability to understand the world, truth and his own self rendering him emblematic of the postmodernist distorted 'self'. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view that man's free will did not stop the use of wars; it rather caused these wars and their traumatic destructive outcomes. Through constructing his protagonist as such, Vonnegut thus argues that the western man must abandon his belief in free will and adopt a passive response to world events.

Coming unstuck in time: Spatio-temporal uncertainty

The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said – and calendars" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 17).

In the postmodern context, "all history awaits repetition in the future: all existence is –as-it-was-and-is-supposed-to become; all moments exist simultaneously" (Leeds, 1996). The postmodern world is a fragmented world; a world of cut-pastes that lead to no significant meaning. Therefore, a linear history which supposes that chronological events conform to a rational ending no longer

exists in a postmodern context. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut utilizes the non-linear structure related to the chaos theory to underline the postmodernist trauma, and to render the post World War Western world a world where nothingness prevails; a world bereft of design. He attempts to "escape the linear progression of fiction by giving us, as nearly as he can, all the moments of Billy Pilgrim's life at once" (McKean, 1969). This use of non-linearity reflects Nietzsche's doctrine of "eternal recurrence" which is "the ultimate denial of meaning and purpose" (Poole, 1991). This doctrine is exemplified in the novel through the Tralfamadorians and Billy Pilgrim's time-travels which deconstruct the modernist linear and teleological occurrence and underline the "Schizophrenia of contemporary American consciousness" (Taylor, 2013).

Vonnegut reflects on the insignificance of time for him - the growing man who has experienced a severe disillusionment in the Western long-advocated moral claims- in the opening chapter of the novel through highlighting his sense of time as opposed to his wife's: "Sooner or later I go to bed, and my wife asks me what time it is. She always has to know the time. Sometimes I don't know, and I say, 'search me'" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 6). This sense of loss and the incompatibility of time as it seems and time as it really is finds best manifestation in the character of Billy Pilgrim as well as the Tralfamadorians' concept of time. Pilgrim is introduced as becoming unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He had 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 events in between (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 37).

This opening piece of information the reader receives about Pilgrim frees Vonnegut from any chronological obligation. By using this technique, the author is capable of placing his character within any time frame. The novel is constructed in fragments which are linked through the technique of time-travel. Dresden itself is a moment of rupture, which implies the impossibility of linearity. It is an event that cuts the homogeneous web of American morality; an "epistemic and existential tear in the fabric of experience" (Taylor, 2013). That's why Vonnegut has chosen to use this non-linear narrative structure to focus on and revolve around this crucial moment. That is, time fragmentation is used to keep the key event – the Dresden bombing – fresh in the reader's mind.

Furthermore, the science fiction section is inserted in the story to unfold the postmodernist argument concerning time. For the Tralfamadorians. When a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past.... All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians...

can see how permanent all the moments are" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 22). The Tralfamadorians teach Pilgrim how to view his life as a long line or rather a circular structure of events, the thing that leads the "generic imprint of these moments to always express themselves in the same way" (Sieber, 2000). The moment of Billy Pilgrim's death is the moment in which Vonnegut exhibits most the postmodernist spatio-temporal distortion. Pilgrim has left his will together with a tape recorder in which he has described his death: "I, Billy Pilgrim, the tape begins, will die, have died and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 116). While he is addressing a large crowd in Chicago on the issue of flying saucers and the nature of time, Pilgrim predicts his own death within an hour, and closes his speech with these words:

"Farewell, hello, farewell, hello" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 117).

Billy Pilgrim is actually shot, and the reader expects it to be the closure of the story – at least his story. However, it is neither the story's closure nor that of Pilgrim's life. After describing Pilgrim's death, Vonnegut pursues his narrative:

"So Billy experiences death for a while. It is simply violet light and a hum. There isn't anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there. Then he swings back into life again" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 117).

Neurosis, the modern dilemma, and the moment of apocalypse

Nietzsche's last completed work before his final collapse - *Ecco homo: How one becomes what one is* - refers to his project of "remaking the self" (Poole, 1991). Nietzsche's dramatic end in an asylum is no doubt emblematic of a postmodernist "desperate, but futile act of defiance" (Poole, 1991) that has faced disillusionment and the incapability of reconstruction, and a result of his inability to solve the "ills of modernity" (Poole, 1991). *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a seemingly autobiographical statement that puts the American morality 'under erasure'. The novel alludes to these postmodern feelings of existential uncertainty, fear and guilt and reflects "the terror of human indeterminacy amidst the incommensurate seas of history, time, fate, and circumstance" (Taylor, 2013).

Through a variety of elements and especially the character of the protagonist, Vonnegut unmasks the postmodern – especially the American – morality which has proved to be a mere facet covering endless layers of

absurdity and cruelty. Vonnegut bases his narrative on the juxtaposition between stressing the inevitability of the occurrence of the apocalyptic moment and between the suggestion that the world is apt to experience eternity. Pilgrim's insanity implies Vonnegut's inherent message that "the restoration of a real order in modern society...will occur not by blind obedience to totalitarian systems but as a result of challenges to the bureaucratic institutions" (Lupack, 1995). The text's title is Vonnegut's initial attempt to deconstruct the romantic facet of the traumatic effects of wars rather than merely glamorizing them. Billy Pilgrim is exemplary of those children crusaders. In the opening chapter of the novel, Vonnegut openly declares this idea: "We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 12).

This idea is recurrently echoed throughout the novel where there are several incidents highlighting – whether directly or indirectly – Vonnegut's aim. Vonnegut's chosen characters as well tend to unveil the fake postmodern American pretences. Billy Pilgrim, Edgar Derby, Rosewater, as well as the extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians all help in pinpointing Vonnegut's claim. Billy Pilgrim's life is a parody of the American dream; he is a representative of the postmodern America and a victim of the American myth. Pilgrim's life represents the facet of the American dream; whereas his "underside follows the other formula of our time: mental breakdown, shock therapy, emptiness" (Giannone, 1977).

Ironically, Pilgrim is supposed to have survived the war and to have witnessed the American victory. On the surface, Pilgrim is part of those allied forces that have conquered their German enemy; however, in reality, he returns as a "shell-shocked victim" who suffers from disillusionment and depression" (Lupack, 1995). After his supposed triumph and survival, Pilgrim returns home, constructs an optometric business, and makes a family; that means achieving the constituents of the American dream. Nevertheless, after the experience he has passed through, Pilgrim loses his faith in this totalitarian image of the American morality, but is unable to project this growing sense of fear and disillusionment. Therefore, he turns into an escapist who finds no way out except creating his own Utopia; a world which calls for eternity and humanism.

Pilgrim is not a single case; on the contrary, this same experience is shared on behalf of other characters as well. Eliot Rosewater – Pilgrim's chamber mate in the veteran's hospital - has been a captain in World War II and has had terrible experiences in the war that have led him to resort to drinking and reading science fiction stories. He shares with Pilgrim the postmodern self's distrust in a world controlled by a strive for destruction which is often advocated for and protected by the nations' leaders. The victims of these destructive schemes are not

only the soldiers who get murdered or imprisoned in the battlefields; the victims are all citizens from all parties who find the world they live in a bare man-made dystopia which renders the individual's life empty and vague. Vonnegut's doubt in and re-evaluation of American morality is further manifested through the character of Edgar Derby. A middle-aged school teacher who volunteers for the war, Derby is presented as the American patriot who idealizes the American values. His stand is not intended to be ironic; on the contrary, it reveals the conflict within Vonnegut himself. The nature of Derby's death accentuates the postmodern traumatic loss. Derby is not killed in the war; he is rather executed for stealing a teapot. This trivial accident brings the end to this sole idealist putting 'under erasure' the role of heroes in the contemporary world.

Ronald Weary is an American figure further structured by Vonnegut as a cry against American morality. Weary is an 18-year-old American who is described as being "at the end of an unhappy childhood" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 28). Weary fanaticizes that the part he plays in the war is that of "The three musketeers" who were thought of as elite people who have served Christianity greatly. The other two 'musketeers' are skilled scouts. The three are used by Vonnegut as a parody of the 'The three musketeers' for the reason of showing their heroic story as fake as that of the Children's Crusade. Weary's own imaginary version of the war story goes as such:

*There was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary. So it goes. And then Weary tied in with two scouts, and they became close friends immediately.... They shook hands all around. They called themselves 'The Three Musketeers' (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 34).*

Vonnegut's three musketeers do not conform to the unity they need to fulfill their mission. Their fantastical belief in their heroic role in the war is not less an escapist attempt from reality than that of Billy Pilgrim. Deconstructing the importance of the three musketeers is further achieved by giving their name to the candy bar Valencia is constantly chewing, hence degrading their significance as well as questioning the authenticity of any grand heroic narrative. Vonnegut's exhibition of these characters exemplifying the postmodern traumatic present, predicts an apocalyptic future and attempts at creating a new world by going back to early moments of creation. The Tralfamadorians are apt to destroy the earth and its inhabitants to create a new life based on their concepts of continuity and non-linearity.

However, they are advocates of eternity. Pilgrim is tempted by the glory of the American dream, but his participating in the war leads to his mental fall and collapse. He loses his illusory paradise and faces the real

world full of hatred and murder. He witnesses fellow creatures destroying one another exactly as Adam's sons fought over worldly matters. Moreover, the concept of the circular nature of time refers to the no-end of the world. The world is eternal, and whatever end we meet leads to new beginnings in an endless chain of causes and effects. Pilgrim's self-created pilgrimage to Tralfamadore juxtaposes his forced pilgrimage to the battlefield and enhances Vonnegut's own predicament. Billy Pilgrim is a typical first man in Tralfamadore, and lives with his own Eve in this regained paradise. In spite of being watched by the alien Tralfamadoreans, he at last experiences privacy and relief. This is Vonnegut's final message: the postmodern world is no more a world of freedom and morality; it is a world of totalitarian fatalism that must be checked and rejected.

The postmodern cruelty presented by Vonnegut is culminated by the fact that this slaughterhouse is not a fictional setting created to achieve this traumatic effect; it is rather the real setting of Vonnegut's own experience in the war. Vonnegut – and similarly Pilgrim – together with other POWs are being captives in a slaughterhouse, the thing that implies that in the postmodern context, the individual is deprived of his 'will' to be; he is even dehumanized into a mere animal used to fuel the war machine:

The slaughterhouse where Billy is kept as a prisoner in Dresden becomes more than a grotesque naturalistic image of human beings dehumanized by war, hanging like butchered animals on hooks. It becomes an all-encompassing metaphor for human existence in which suffering and death are commonplace (Broer, 1994).

Slaughterhouse-Five thus advocates for a final apocalypse – both moral and physical - referred to through the countless deaths that prevail in the novel. Broer argues that in the novel we – as readers - encounter death by starvation, rotting, incineration, squashing, gassing, shooting, poisoning, bombing, torturing, hanging, and relatively routine death by disease. We get the deaths of dogs, horses, pigs, Vietnamese soldiers, crusaders, hunters, priests, officers, hobos, actresses, prison guards, a slave laborer, a suffragette, Jesus Christ, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Billy Pilgrim's mother and father, his wife, Edgar Derby, Ronald Weary, the regimental chaplain's assistant, Paul Lazzaro, Colonel Wild Bob; we get the deaths of a bottle of champagne, billions of body ice, bacteria, and fleas; the novel; entire towns, and finally the universe (1994).

CONCLUSION

Hence, *reading Slaughterhouse-Five* within the frame of

postmodernist philosophy, renders the novel a reflection of the postmodernist context and an expression of the postmodernist dilemma. The novel is exemplary of the state of the postmodernist epistemological skepticism that throws its shadows on our cognitive apparatus and challenges the rationalist ideals; and of the state of ontological uncertainty – both intratextually and extratextually – that questions the claims of modernism as far as homogeneity, sound meaning and credible representation of the world are concerned. The novel is an indicator of the death of the world; a world lacking any sense or meaning; a chaotic world that entombs under its surface countless sufferings, deaths and moral decay. The text verbalizes Vonnegut's immersion in the absurdity of history through offering a narrative that embodies the dilemma of the postwar generation. Deconstructing history in order to reconstruct it is Vonnegut's tool to revive the human trapped within the amber of historical turmoil. Portraying a world that is falling into pieces, Vonnegut renders the whole system of representation nothing but a signifier which refers to another signifier, leading to no signifieds. The linguistic input of the text thus serves to shatter the system of representation, yielding many interpretations for the same phenomenon and asserting the fact that there is no single 'Truth', but rather a multiplicity of 'Truths'.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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