

## WAR FRONTIERS IN THE 1960s AMERICAN FICTION: KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE* (1969)

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**Abstract:** *The article War frontiers in the 1960s American Fiction: Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five deals with the importance and the legacy of Kurt Vonnegut's novel in shaping war frontiers in a decade that one could easily associate with a series of movements which changed America for generations to come in terms of human rights, political diversity, war strategies and social realities. The aim of the article is to investigate in what way both Kurt Vonnegut and his masterpiece, Slaughterhouse-Five responded to the incredible social tensions of the late 1960s, which saw the burning of major portions of several American cities in race riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the seemingly endless acceleration of the war in Vietnam. In a time of political protest, social turmoil, and rejection of the previous generation's values, an epoch in which various frontiers of mind interweaved, Slaughterhouse-Five had the enormous impact it did because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its antiwar message to a most receptive audience. Performing "a duty dance with the death" Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five deals with World War II and asserts a strongly antiwar position which was in trend at that time.*

*Challenging readers to make sense of a world gone mad, Slaughterhouse-Five provided new frontiers of writing, understanding and interpreting history in a turbulent age. Experience, historical and social context of the 1960s as well as the need for innovative fiction in a period when novelty was a key word in everything, made Kurt Vonnegut aware of his mission as a writer and human being in creating and presenting events, characters and hidden messages in a unique style that it still has an impact on readers and cultures.*

Being “a decade that seems to hold our imaginations long after its time has passed” [Bloom, 4] the 1960s was a great time in the history of America, many different events and subjects that were important to American culture rose of this era. It was a time of political protest, social turmoil, and rejection of the previous generation's values, an epoch in which various frontiers of mind interweaved. A series of movements changed America for generations to come in terms of human rights, political diversity, war strategies, and social realities.

Furthermore, it is stated that the 1960s remains the most intriguing and controversial of American decades. During the sixties America experienced J.F. Kennedy's New Frontier, the Cuban Missile Crisis, a presidential assassination, a devastating armed conflict in southeast Asia, a Civil Rights Revolution, a transformation of sexual attitudes, a reconsideration of gender relations, a countercultural movement, an alteration in family structure, a man on the moon, and much more, which more than provided a background for American literature.

It is no doubt that The Sixties remain unique not only in terms of social, political, economical approaches, but in terms of intellectual and cultural ways of thinking, too. Authors define their positions as individuals, reacting against the general conformism provided by the society they live in as they deal with more general issues and speak for people who identify with the author's position. Moreover, the text becomes a “cult book” since the author shares the same experiences, anxieties with the reader. Obviously, such texts are rare since they are born from contradictions of new frontiers of the mind at a particular time in history.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the author responded to the incredible social tensions of the late 1960s, which saw the burning of major portions of several American cities in race riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the seemingly endless acceleration of the war in Vietnam.

A major reason *Slaughterhouse-Five* had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its antiwar message to a most receptive audience. Precisely because the story was so hard to tell, and because Vonnegut was willing to take the two decades necessary to tell it—to speak the unspeakable—*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a great novel, a masterpiece sure to remain a landmark of American literature.

Performing “a duty dance with the death” Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* deals with World War II and

asserts a strongly antiwar position which was in trend at that time. The novel which is seen as a fable “that may shed light on cultural and political phenomena of the 1960s” [Marvin, 113] alongside with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* mixes brutal realism with science fiction, challenging the audience to make sense of a world gone mad.

Admitting that there is “*Nothing intelligent to say about a massacre*” Vonnegut succeeded in finding a new way to convey the horror, a new form to reflect a new kind of consciousness. Thus, he used irony, to be sure, but he went further, by altering the fundamental processes of narration itself. More than a conventional reminiscence of war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to describe a new mode of perception that radically alters traditional conceptions of time and morality.

Kurt Vonnegut uses a combination of dark humor and irony in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As a result, the novel enables the reader to realize the horrors of war while simultaneously laughing at some of the absurd situations it can generate. Mostly, Vonnegut wants the reader to recognize the fact that one has to accept things as they happen because no one can change the inevitable. Moreover, Vonnegut struggles with the central issues of humanity such as death and war, love and war, living with war in a humane and emotional way.

*Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade, a Duty Dance With Death* was published in 1969, and it changed the world. In particular, it changed Vonnegut's world and made him a public spokesman against war and human cruelty. Through his novel Vonnegut draws the reader's attention to dangers in society, dangers of both technology and social power, and illustrates the desperation of the situation through the use of an impending apocalypse.

Vonnegut described *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a novel he was compelled to write, since it is based on one of the most extraordinary and significant events of his life. During World War II when he was a prisoner of the German Army, Vonnegut witnessed the Allied bombing of Dresden, Germany, which destroyed the city and killed more than one hundred thirty-five thousand people. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut's attempt to both document and criticize this event. Additionally, it was on December 19, 1944 when Kurt Vonnegut was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge; he was 22 years old. Sent to Dresden, he survived the firebombing of the city on February 13–14, 1945, in which some many people were killed. As Vonnegut confessed in an interview:

it seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden, the firebombing of Dresden, since it was the largest massacre in the history of Europe and I am a person of European extraction and I, a writer, had been present. I *had* to say something about it. [Allen, 230]

In a book of powerful passages, there is no more powerful one than the passage at the end of the novel, in Vonnegut's autobiographical chapter 10 in which the author states the circumstances of his masterpiece through a succession of statements followed by the fatalistic three words that obsessively repeat in the novel:

Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes.

Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes.

And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes. [Vonnegut, 210]. One of Robert Kennedy's promises in his presidential campaign was to stop the war, and when he died that hope seemed to die with him. For Vonnegut, and for Billy, the main character of the novel, it must have seemed that Dresden was happening all over again in Vietnam.

The novel may be seen as the slaughterhouse of the modern world. Not simply does the novel indict contemporary obsession with destructive technologies (the firebombing of Dresden) but it provides Vonnegut the opportunity to comment on the insanity of war generally and, by comparing Americans to Nazis and other butchers who operate in the slaughterhouse of contemporary society, the American insanity in Vietnam in particular.

The novel is so constructed that one cannot determine whether or not what Billy Pilgrim sees is real; indeed, the reader never knows precisely where Billy is in time and space. One only knows that Billy Pilgrim's mind is real, and through the indistinctly lit corridors of this labyrinth Vonnegut guides his readers.

Although Vonnegut appears to feel that man can never adequately distinguish reality from illusion, truth from fantasy, he is not a nihilist; he believes passionately in both the importance of the individual and the need for human love and compassion. He opposes any institution, be it scientific, religious, or political that dehumanizes man and considers him a mere number and not a human being. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he condemns war for this very reason; it tends to make people "the listless playthings of enormous forces" and discourages them from "being characters." [Vonnegut, 140-141]

The importance with which Vonnegut regarded the role of "structuring the void" is evident not only in the way he has conducted himself since becoming famous, which is to remain active as a public spokesman on political, social, and ecological issues. Jerome Klinkowitz argues that Vonnegut produced a literary revolution in fiction as well as in journalism: the key to his literary revolution is that in both his fiction and his journalism Kurt Vonnegut found a way of taking events - even the fantasies of science fiction and the calamities of recent national history, most of them so unconventional as to deny expressibility as subject matter - and measuring them against the mundane, stable facts of his own American life. [Klinkowitz, 77]

Kurt Vonnegut has rightly been called *the* novelist for the sixties. More than any other writer of the decade, Vonnegut articulated the fears of a generation determined to change America's course. His novels preached the folly of war. They warned of a future ruled by machines, not men.

Hope, though, does remain despite mankind's tendency toward impurity. Vonnegut emphasizes his humanist worldview, which states that people should treat others with kindness simply for the sake of doing good. Though Vonnegut

did not approve of the state of America during the 1950s and up until his death in 2007, he hoped for something better. He believed that it was his duty as a writer to both point out America's flaws and to help America improve.

Over the course of his career, he has worked to instruct and change perceptions as much as to entertain, and on his agenda is a rebellion against the American class system.

His journalistic education significantly impacted his prose style. As William Allen points out: "Like Hemingway before him, Vonnegut would be influenced all his life by the simple rules of journalism: get the facts right; compose straightforward, declarative sentences; know your audience" [Allen, 42].

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 the 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.

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.

The method of inserting biography into fiction perhaps prevents readers from easily dismissing the events Vonnegut describes as simply part of a made-up or fictional world. Vonnegut's real-life experiences and the fact that he was an eyewitness to the bombing lend authenticity to Billy Pilgrim's story. At the same time, however, Vonnegut's presence in the text destroys the illusion of reality associated with the realistic novel; the authorial intrusions constantly remind readers that they are, in fact, reading a novel. Thus, readers cannot lose themselves in the romance of war or get caught up in the fiction, in suspense or glamour, and forget they are hearing a story.

Even if in the 1960s in the U.S. opposition to the war grew, in Vietnam the killing continued. The Americans would eventually suffer fifty thousand dead, but the Vietnamese would pay a much heavier price. Millions of Vietnamese died, many of them from heavy bombing. The U.S. dropped more explosive power onto Vietnam than all of the world's powers had dropped in all of World War II put together, including the two atomic bombs and the bombing of Dresden and Tokyo. Vonnegut's novel about the bombing of Dresden was written while American policy makers and pilots were implementing one of the most brutal bombing campaigns in history.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is part memoir, part war novel. Many have called it the most important war novel to come out of World War II. It is Kurt Vonnegut's attempt to portray a very difficult event, the firebombing and complete destruction of Dresden. Through his alter ego, who travels through time and space, Vonnegut acknowledges the impossibility of accurately portraying such an event, and instead focuses on the emotions and thoughts that it raised within him. In the process, he revolutionizes both what we think of as a novel and what we think of war. Thus, one of the most important postmodernist novelists of the 1960s, along with Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon or John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut managed to cross war frontiers of a turbulent decade and to transcend the challenges of an era which it is still debated. In addition to this, the fact that Vonnegut is still read, studied, acclaimed or criticized in schools, universities gives him the legacy he deserves and puts him on the map of American fiction.

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Asserting that “here we are, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why” Vonnegut claims that it is all in our minds. His masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-Five* provided new frontiers of writing, understanding and interpreting history in a turbulent age. Experience, historical and social context of the

1960s as well as the need for innovative fiction in a period when novelty was a key word in everything made Kurt Vonnegut aware of his mission as a writer and human being in creating and presenting events, characters and hidden messages in a unique style that it still has an impact on readers and cultures.

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