

**AN ANALYSIS ON NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN KURT VONNEGUT'S
*SLAUGHTER HOUSE – FIVE***

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Abstract

This paper examines the postmodern brilliance of Vonnegut's experimental writing in *Slaughter House Five*. There have been two major concerns voiced since postmodernism's inception. That is to say, the two most prominent genres in contemporary writing are those dealing with weariness and those dealing with refuelling. For this reason, this article delves into Vonnegut's criticism of literary weariness prevalent in modernism in an effort to permanently refill these literary genres. Vonnegut gets across his criticism through tinkering with the novel's structure, narration, and characters' words. It might be claimed that Vonnegut combines fact and fantasy in his works. Therefore, in the sake of renewing manipulation, the self-reflexive metafiction under discussion conflates fictitious experimental forms with ideological critique that attests to its fictionality. The literary critic's job is to declare the reader-author relationship as complicated, and this is generally done through the use of a criticism. That genuinely postmodern metafiction is being distinguished from what may be called therapeutic experimentation in a self-justifying manner is, thus, the key point of emphasis. This means that metafiction does not pave the way for new genre signs. Instead, it's the first step in a work of ideological dialogic fiction that bridges the gap between text and world. Allusions to Patricia Waugh's use of metafictional elements will be made as part of this examination of the novel's narrative. The focalization factor, developed by French dramatist Gérard Genette, will be used to analyse the narrator's credibility. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogue to the character's speech is a great way to understand what they're saying. Vonnegut's play with these devices in storytelling exemplifies the postmodern blending of fiction and reality.

Keywords: Narrative, Focalization, Post modern

Kurt Vonnegut's works frequently veer off the traditional path of a story's progression. His imaginative works of fiction have earned him a reputation as an accomplished artist. Vonnegut "introduces the contrasted concepts, which the narrative proper will develop" in reference to a new literary standard established in the latter half of the 20th century (Vanderwerken 46). Vonnegut was a pioneering postmodern novelist who dared to take risks. Vonnegut stands out from other authors in postmodern critical canons because of his unique ability to combine "personal experience with fictitious brilliance" (Berryman 98). Vonnegut uses his personal experience as a basis for a fictitious story. But within the framework of postmodern relativism, he offers a range of contrasting and experimental viewpoints that are interrelated through postmodern poetics. Naturally, there may be unambiguous "view of reality as each actual perspective reflects a relative type of worth or true authenticity," despite the existence of both fragmentation and collectivism (Hungerford 27). However, "beyond many of his initial, obvious successes... Vonnegut really succeeded in lasting fashion in coping with the special problem of

the author or ‘word-smith’ in his hypervisual realm” (italics in original) is how one critic describes how Vonnegut’s obsession with reality manifests itself in his fiction (Meyer 107).

In terms of experimenting with literature, Vonnegut arranges his own personal experiences into a fictitious setting. This fits with the narrative of the war’s supposed political and social success and upheaval. In addition, the spiritual challenge he faced in his work during the war is represented in fiction, in the form of an assumed epiphany, via the overwhelming prioritisation of individual ambitions in life above the shared sad truth. To put it another way, Vonnegut identifies with “individuals who chronicle their experience governed by the relative encounters they meet.” It is, in fact, the accidental endeavour of individuals over a finite period of time” (O’Donnell 82). Billy Pilgrim, an American soldier in World War II, is the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The events of Billy’s life are recounted in a circular storyline that uses flashbacks. While Billy is out in the world, he encounters numerous things that could only exist in a work of fiction (Waugh 2).

The narrative primarily concerns itself with generic norms by making textual remarks on the potential construction of story approaches. From Aristotle, where “the *logos* (the events) represented the tale and *mythos* (the plot, rearrangement, or discourse)” (italics and parenthesis in original), Victor Erlich deduces the essentials of storytelling. (239-40). This incorporation of “the link between fiction and reality” is a hallmark of metafiction (2). As a result, the semi-real literary hits mesh reality with the story’s fictitious happenings. In this vein, there are blatant statements on the feasibility of fiction-building in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. According to Billy’s book’s narrative remarks, this is spot on. Specifically, Billy negotiates the standard of the story’s finale. An amusingly macabre tale of Edgar Derby’s beheading may be found in Billy’s book. As has been claimed, self-reflexive devices cover the method by which a tale addresses the specific patterns of fictional stories including plot, climax, narrator, and so on. The climax is discussed as a literary device in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy thinks back to his novel and the absurdist way in which he built the book’s climax when he talks about his time in the war: “I imagine the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby,” he writes. The irony is unbelievable. A city is completely destroyed by fire, and tens of thousands of people perish as a result. Then an American foot soldier is caught stealing a teapot among the rubble. And after a fair trial, he is executed by firing squad (original italics)” (2).

The author then gives us an intimate look into Billy’s past. The reader is immersed in the fictional drama through the use of the fictional conventions, which is the central tactic of metafictional self-reflexivity. Also, the reader takes in the metafictional introspection and uses it to inform his own appraisal of the piece. Why? Because “doing what we appreciate for the sake of something else” is at the heart of the works (Suits 15). Vonnegut’s metafictional method is disseminated through this focus on the book’s subjective remarks. Vonnegut explores the topic of narrative and the aesthetic approaches used in it in great length. So far, he’s been using Billy’s words to say it indirectly: “don’t you think that’s truly where the climax should come?” He declared, “I don’t know anything about it.” The phrase “That’s your business, not mine” (2). In addition, the author’s insights are made clearer by the presence of metafictional terms in their formal forms. This is roughly the range of the author’s forward narrative depiction of the material “content” of his work, as the “fictional content of the story is continually reflected by its formal existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of ‘textuality’” (italics in original) (Waugh 15).

The “textuality” of the first edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is what ushers in Billy’s earlier description of his novel as a “masterpiece” (1). Billy writes a fictitious novel based on his life because of a confluence of reasons and events. “the intrinsic intricacies and multiplicities of literary form as aesthetic,” as Nigel Fabb puts it (2). To that end, the book’s genuine relativist tenets allow for a wide range of perspectives on Billy and his pivotal moments in the battle. While in German captivity, he often talks about his experiences. By way of illustration, when Billy thinks back on Dresden, he is inspired to pen down his horrifying account of that city. While doing so, he writes a book. His recollections, therefore, are the driving force for his own story: “but not many words about Dresden emerged from my head then-not enough of them to produce a book, anyhow.” Not many words occur to me now that my lads are all grown up and I’m an old fart with memories and Pall Malls. When I consider how little use my memories of Dresden has been to me, yet how alluring a subject it would be to write about, I find myself thinking: “Oh, Dresden (1).

Vonnegut, in these cases, acts as an authorial judge or textual discretionary applier. In this way, he can afford to put a “moratorium on representational issues” (Pavel 182). It’s a metafictional retelling of Billy’s story. Waugh elaborates on this quality by saying, “the lowest common denominator of metafiction is both to produce a fiction and to make a comment about the fabrication of that fiction” (6). The narrative principles act as a core parallel between the metafictional parts and the text, creating a subliminal familiarity. The literary aspect of “*Slaughterhouse-Five*” is a synthesis of many essential metafictional components. All the metafictional quirks that characterise the climactic physical features are consolidated in the first episode’s unique hint: “the name of the book was *The Big Board*.” After reading a few pages, he realised he had already read it years before at a veterans hospital. Two humans from Earth got abducted by aliens. They were kept as exhibits at a zoo on the planet Zircon-212. (86). *Metafiction and Metahistory*, by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, 2007, delves into the genre’s historical underpinnings. To paraphrase their argument: “the concept of historical reality, as a clear opposition to fiction, can scarcely go uncontested” (16). As a result, the author can include real-world events and conditions into the work. As a result, the reader may observe genuine insights inserted artfully throughout the text. To sum up, “the actual tale trappings are eventually reduced to an allegory of the working of the narration” propagandises a version of history that is mostly inaccurate (Hutcheon 12).

Vonnegut’s adoption of fictitious storylines is assimilated in Billy’s instance in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In his literary plots, the author embodies and projects a certain style, one in which “there is here an exciting cultural cycle in circulation” (Fekete xiii). In the first section of the work, Billy narrates his narrative. He does so in the form of a story, although it is a fictionalised account of his experiences. He describes how he utilised his daughter’s crayons (a different colour for each kepoi character) and other writing implements to compose his novel. It was the beginning of the tale at one end of the wallpaper, the end of the story at the other, and the entire centre section was the middle (3). This section has a startling allusion to the way Vonnegut manipulates Billy’s storyline in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a story that opens in the novel’s midsection. This slyness is typical of Vonnegut’s postmodern experimental approach.

Huge props go to Gérard Genette for coming up with the idea of the focalization element. He had first used it in connection with narrative theory. The point of view or perspective from which a tale is conveyed is what we call its focalization. As a result, the events depicted in the

narrative take place in a specific setting. Focus aids in identifying certain elements in a situation. There are two types of characters in a story: the one doing the talking and the one watching. That's why Genette asks two major questions about this narrative dichotomy: "the contrast 'between the query Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? and the question What is the nature of the narrative perspective?'" And a very other one: who is the narrator? To put it another way: Who sees? , and the inquiry Who is doing the talking? ? " (186) In dualism, the fictitious events seem to be portrayed from a single vantage point. Focalization establishes a "fundamental contrast between the narrator's tale and the manner that story is portrayed." A storyteller's subjective point of view is a "internal" one, and it is incompatible with an objective account of an event (Richardson 25) A legalisation of point of view in storytelling serves as the medium for this polarity. Mieke Bal argues that the focalization element is the "most significant, most penetrating, and most subtle technique of manipulation accessible to the narrative text, whether literary or otherwise" (116). Therefore, the "technical construction of narrator" is subject to perceptibility's influential intrinsic play (109).

Since its inception, "focalization factor" has been used as a definitive phrase to describe the narrative position in which "the tale is presented in the text via the mediation of some "prism," "perspective," "angle of view," verbalised by the narrator albeit not necessarily his" (Rimmon-Kenan 71). To manage its extradiegetic narrative position, the extradiegetic voice in *Slaughterhouse-Five* blends some authorial discursive statements. As evidence, consider the author's intrusion of metafictional comments throughout the narration. This section is dedicated mostly to the non-canonical or "extradiegetic" narrator. Similarly, Vonnegut plays around with the concept of the extradiegetic narrator. Technically experimenting with this narrative stance, he offers a critical view of current fatigued forms. To introduce his authorial judgements, Vonnegut uses an extradiegetic narrator in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as was common in modernist writing.

It was suggested in the above paragraph that Billy's tale is presented in flashback. In the last chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he describes his experiences in Dresden during the war. His perspective is utilised throughout the narrative. The unconventional scope of his tale is introduced by the imperative language "listen," which piques our interest in what's to come. However, Vonnegut's omniscient narrator takes over in the second half to tell his narrative. Part 2 opens with Billy's narrative being recounted frankly and with a watchful eye: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has been unstuck in time" (10). Circling "the understanding that the agent that observes must be accorded a status other than that of the agent that narrates" is central to the extradiegetic narrative viewpoint (Bal 101). An intermediary is necessary between the narrative's "eye that" sees and the voice "that speaks" (O'Neill 85) in order to achieve focalization. And the focalization factor's narrator "is here not simply reporting the general sensibility of the community but also describing its shared field of view and therefore giving an unexpected and intriguing collective focalization," as the authors put it (Aldama 4).

As Rimmon-Kenan puts it, "the tale is given in the text via the mediation of some 'prism, 'perspective, 'angle of view,' verbalised by the narrator albeit not necessarily his." (71). The setting and the story's inception are detailed in Genette's definition of the narrative voice. Billy's backstory is told in an extracanonical fashion in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The narration of his slumber, for instance, begins in the non-canonical third person. Now the reader is presented with a "prism" of the entire story: "Billy had gone to sleep a senile widower and awoke on his wedding

day. His feet have taken him from 1955 to 1941. Once he went through the portal, he was suddenly transported back to 1963. He claims to have witnessed his own birth and death several times, and to have made sporadic trips to the countless events in between. (10).

The journey that Billy will take from this point on will begin with the same vantage point. This is an outsider's point of view in the story. An unnamed narrator provides a running commentary on Billy's travels from one location to the next. The discrepancies in how Billy's deeds are portrayed are significant. The narrator's perspective is highlighted by the narrative variable, as mentioned in Genette's argument. Vonnegut appears to be aware of the narrator's perspective in the work. So, he sprinkles authorial comments all over the action. This is an example of what Genette calls "narrating actively," in which the author creates a new point of view for the story (213). Vonnegut's ability to accurately portray life is encapsulated in the narrative point of view symbol used here. He makes up a backstory for Billy and goes back in time. Plus, he interweaves Billy's journeys with actual occurrences from Billy's life. Nonetheless, Billy draws parallels between his stories and real-world events. Beginning at the conclusion of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his narrative is told in flashback. However, a different narrative perspective is used to tell his made-up story. The events of Billy's life are held by Vonnegut's extradiegetic narrator to be part of a wonderful storyline that takes place during a time voyage. The author makes a point of revealing some story details related to this imaginary scope. Genette analyses the existence of this author in his or her story from the perspective of several writing techniques. The narrative point of view adopted by a writer is determined by the author's chosen style. In a similar vein, the reader is immersed in fictional settings to:

identify the narrating instance with the instance of "writing," the narrator with the author, and the recipient of the narrative with the reader of the work: a confusion that is perhaps legitimate in the case of a historical narrative or a real autobiography, but not when we are dealing with a narrative of fiction, where the role of narrator is itself fictive, even if assumed directly by the author, and where the supposed narrating situation can be very different from the act of writing (or of dictating) which refers to it. (213-214)

The author's philosophy is carried out by an extradiegetic narrator who directly addresses the factiousness of the people. Vonnegut's use of an extradiegetic narrator limits the scope of his technical experiments. But he uses a subjective view of the literary narrator to manipulate the extradiegetic perspective typical of postmodern literature. He devises original story angles to ensure fiction doesn't die of literary overexposure. His unconventional method is ultimately successful because of the characters' conversations.

To conclude this paper has made an attempt to do a narrative analysis of the novel's storyline, narrator, and characters' speech has preceded the analysis. The study has also located where the postmodern literary experimentation first took place. The primary claim of this study has been that the criticism of current literary weariness has to be made more obvious. Vonnegut praises the greatness of art in light of this postmodern tale. His bold experimentalism has produced this decade's catchphrase (Anderson 37). The first motif is consistent with the "sole means we have to argue in favour of postmodernist philosophy is still an appeal to history," which encapsulates the central postmodern artistic adroitness (Vattimo 139). This recurring theme is crucial to the novel's development. The linear time sequence is the traditional building block of fictional storylines in modern literature. There is a logical progression from the beginning to the

conclusion. With its focus on the past, *Slaughterhouse-Five* deserves to be considered a legitimate work of fiction. This is because, according to postmodernist experimentation, “it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralise the events which it treats” (italics in original) (White 14). The end product is a postmodern indictment of tired literary conventions. For such “used-upness,” the creative risk-taking with the story, the narrator, and the characters’ speech seems like a true replenishment. This answer encompasses the dual portrayal of fiction and reality that has been the focus of this research.

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