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## Kurt Vonnegut a post modern- Genius excelling in black humor

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### ABSTRACT

*Kurt Vonnegut is a postmodern marvel. His heart-wrenching novel Slaughterhouse-5 is about World War II and it's horrors, and how Kurt Vonnegut uses black humor to circumvent the tragic horror of war is the main theme of this article. It is an attempt to show that Kurt Vonnegut is a postmodern scribe employing all forms of satire especially grotesque humor which puts horror and humor side by side. This article tries to show that Kurt Vonnegut with his postmodern philosophy uses the conventional satirical tools like parody, irony and burlesque and the unconventional instruments like the black humor and Metalanguage. This article emphasizes his perspective on the ills of modern warfare and the socio-political injustices that are heaped upon the meek and the un-protesting common man on the street. We understand poststructuralism and postmodernism are in fact two sides of a new critical literary thought. This article tries to show that Kurt Vonnegut may have a change of heart from being a mute spectator to man's suffering to a difficult kind of literature which will have something to say against the destabilizing forces of nature. In this article, it is highlighted that the reader has a greater role to play in the text than the author himself as postulated by Barthe as 'the death of the author.'*

**Keywords**— Absurdity, Futility, Horror-humor-horror, Grotesque humor, Subversion- degenerative literature, Meta language, Burlesque, Parody, Reflexivity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading of Slaughterhouse 5 leaves this lingering question in the mind. It is a very convincing argument that Kurt Vonnegut also is spastic in time and hung between fantasy and reality when he wrote Slaughterhouse 5 and also in real life – what with his struggle supporting a large adopted family and his skirmishes with his publishers. He took new avatars as a professor, writer, salesman, and a vagabond. His life was very unstructured and unplanned with moments of consistency and brilliance and period of indolence and degrading despondency. He was sometimes a despot at home, a spoilsport in his literary life and generally undependable as some of his publishers would vouchsafe. What he had in his mind when he began this story is inscrutable. Many of his attempts ended up abruptly only to initiate a new beginning. His intentions were suspect. His fellow veteran's wife accused him of being a warmongering devil. He had to explain that what he was attempting was an anti-war novel. He hated war so much that he had to go and write many anti-war novels. But all his attempts were strengthened by his own disenchantment with American politicians' failed promises. He was correctly labeled as a postmodern writer by his indulgence in the notion of the absurdity of man's struggle against forces beyond his control. Kurt Vonnegut and his characters faced tragic events with a nervous laughter. He maintained a fading line between reality and fantasy in Slaughterhouse 5. Kurt Vonnegut wrote with a near hysteria and a punishing isolation reiterating the alienation and despair of man in an absurd cosmos. He had to laugh at the absurdity of life during the wartime, though mirthless and painful. He wrote to make us aware of the horrors of war and of the mess we are in. As a typical postmodern writer, he emphasized the uselessness of finding

solutions to problems. Bureaucratic systems and the war machinery were laughed at and he posited that these systems were infected with entropic forces which led to a final disintegration of these systems. Unreason, absurdity, and foolishness stood behind the façade of reason, order, and logic in war and explaining this paradox in *Slaughterhouse 5* was a task which Kurt Vonnegut undertook. Another peculiarity was his rendition of this story in an apparently disjointed manner, seemingly unconnected and traveling back and forth in time and geopolitical regions. In a mesmerizing way, he let us tread on the tenuous line between fantasy and reality. In the making of this novel, he traveled from comic dimensions to horror and to the emptiness of logic. He placed the reader between laughter and fear. He, with great wisdom, wrote about the nefarious designs of the war machinery. It lets us know what we are permitted to know about reality. He was subverting the so-called 'truths' of social systems. He made us understand that we live not inside reality but inside our representation of it.

Gallows humor is about coping with life's cruelty. When life gathers around you dire and unbearable losses and situations you can either feel embittered and hate everything around you including yourself or laugh at them loudly. Black humor is an escape route using which one can come out unscathed laughing at everything. It is a technique wise men have devised; it may seem macabre and horrid but it is an impenetrable armor against pain and profound grief. Great men of letters knew this knack in life and used it in their creations. What a magic potion it is which helps you to stand up and walk away when the ripping talons of melancholy slashes at you. It can be a light-hearted banter or deep empathy coated with a veneer of black humor. It can be a crude expletive trash or a tender expostulation, a tirade or a pleading. The mechanism is infallible, but for it, many of us cannot continue to live. Black humor is a panacea for all tragedy. It is how well an author uses it that leaves us either laughing at sad ends or drown in a slough of despondency. O God what a healing touch it has! It smoothenes out our careworn hearts and brows. How Kurt Vonnegut approaches it is my quest. To understand this idiom is my quest. Unveiling his convictions with which he voices his rebellion through his characters is the substance of this article. I shall echo this in every attempt to make one understand.

Black humor is about handling death, loss of material, love, defeat, or even an argument. It is about the resolution of losing one's everything into gaining one's equanimity or a stable state of survival. It is a cleansing of one's dark emotions. It is in a word a rebirth from the womb of insufferable loss, pain, and defeat. Kurt Vonnegut approaches the problem in different ways. His methods, ruses, escapades, remedies, and victory over painful life-threatening situations and death are so different. The common key is black humor to open a new space of relief from the darkness of oppression and dread to reach a state of forgetfulness and oblivion. Kurt Vonnegut fights real-life situations in World War II. Vonnegut is a real player in the drama of death. He virtually laughs at death and defeat. Losing is not to be looked down upon; losers are his heroes. Ordinary men glow like Achilles and Hercules. In fact, in his novels, ordinariness is victorious over cataclysmic forces whether it is the bombing of Dresden in World War II or our everyday death knocking at our door in a civilian world.

*Slaughter House –Five* by Kurt Vonnegut is sheer wizardry. Sarcasm and Black humor cut like a Samurai sword, clean and surgical. It is in fact autobiographical. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim is but a literary Siamese twin of Vonnegut. In fact, whatever transpired or is chronicled in the novel is a real description of wartime events in which Vonnegut himself is a soldier. The heart-rending pathos of every incident is coated with black humor and irony. It is a sad tale about the attack on Dresden. Billy Pilgrim comes "unstuck in time" and weaves between his escapades behind German lines in World War II, tralfadamore an imaginary alien planet, his life in Ilium as a business magnet and the horrendous bombing day of Dresden where more than two million innocents perish. This is an anti-war novel with deep insight and a lot of heart. In fact, he calls it "the Children's Crusade" for the conscripts are babies "just 18-year-olds". In all their innocence they get slaughtered trudging mindlessly to their deaths holding on to mere straws of emotions and memories. It is a saga of simple-minded soldiers who walk to their graves dictated by despotic leaders ruthless, hellish and cunning. Every page cries out at the savagery that the war generates and the unfeeling terror it engenders. The soldiers are just flotsam and jetsam in the bloody river of war helplessly swept to their ends clinging to simple totems and trivialities. The war machinery is a monster. To feed its ravenous hunger hundreds die unwept and unsung. The crudeness with which death is accepted in one's stride is really shocking but it is a mechanism human mind devises to absorb the feral thrust of tragedy. The protagonist Billy becomes "spastic in time". Is it most probably a figment of his imagination to hide from his wartime anguish or is it real? This lingers in the mind of the readers. It remains unsolved until the end. The book in all its entirety is the author's own experience behind enemy lines and his encounters with sad, funny, and horrific events culminating on the D-day- the bombing of Dresden. It is also about how this man-made apocalypse shapes his civilian life dotted with life's cruel upheavals. By ignoring them and picking out funny aspects of these incidents he is trying to live a normal life. The protagonist life is turned upside down and he barely manages to survive to lose his mind may be in the bargain.

*The cattle are lowing  
The baby awakes  
But the little Lord Jesus  
No crying he makes*

What a yearning man has to lead a normal life. This pleasing normal vision is what the characters pine for. They never make it. The author with a sad note says:

*“And even if wars don’t keep coming like glaciers there would still be plain old death”*

The whole novel is degenerative in character as opposed to the generative writings of the ‘modern literary era.’ He experimented in grotesque black humor. He wrote a famous quote when he began *Slaughterhouse 5*.

*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.*

Billy Pilgrim the protagonist is none other than Kurt Vonnegut himself. Whether Billy Pilgrim or Kurt Vonnegut is the alter ego is a million dollar question.

*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.*

Billy Pilgrim is a poor assistant to a chaplain in World War II in this famous book about the bombing of Dresden in German. Kurt Vonnegut spins out such a fantastic fib about Billy Pilgrim being able to travel in time back and forth and travel to Tralfamadore (another fictitious planet) The onus of writing such a novel about the horrors of World War II has beset Kurt Vonnegut with insurmountable factual twists which were overcome by this genius of black humor by becoming spastic in time himself. It is important to add that he (the author) himself was there in Dresden on the day it was bombed. The pathos and drudgery of war had made Kurt Vonnegut to circumvent the shock of the Holocaust by traveling in time and space. Maybe it is an escape mechanism. When the situation gets too painful the human mind suppresses the memory and feeling deep down into the substratum of one’s consciousness. Another way is to leave the scene to forget. The pain of the beastly war was such that Kurt Vonnegut and his characters become spastic in time. Billy Pilgrim when he became a prisoner of war travels back and forth in time when the scene gets too hot to put up with. Just at the moment when he is being shot at by Germans Billy Pilgrim goes spastic in time and travels back to Tralfamadore. Kurt Vonnegut is hounded by a series of financial mishaps when he was writing this novel. When his daughter is angry with him over some issue he travels back to war in Dresden. His way of escape is to identify himself with the protagonist. Kurt Vonnegut finds it hard to come to grips with the horrors of war. His fellow veteran’s wife is angry with him because she felt that he is going to write a novel extolling the glory of war which might attract her children to join the army. Kurt Vonnegut is apologetic; he says that he is going to write an anti-war novel in fact. Kurt Vonnegut should have found it very hard to face the daunting task of putting down the horrid details of war; he had to excuse himself or to abdicate from this heavy responsibility. He chose to become spastic. Instead of continuing to describe a nasty scene beyond a degree he escapes to describe a funny episode in Billy Pilgrim’s life. His technique should have taken away the excruciating ache that he must have felt when he wrote about the devastation and the decimation of his fellow soldiers during World War II. So I am convinced that Kurt Vonnegut is a postmodern genius excelling in black humor.

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