

Postmodernist Techniques in works of Kurt Vonnegut

Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut is considered a representative writer of Post-modern literature which is characterized by heavy reliance on techniques like fragmentation, paradox, and questionable narrators, and is often (though not exclusively) defined as a style or trend which emerged in the post-World War II era. He is presenting the true picture of the state of mind that prevailed throughout 1960's and 1970's.

His fiction illustrates the pressing literary, philosophical, and social concerns of the late 20th century. But perhaps most important thing is that Vonnegut's fiction offers a scathing critique of social injustice, war, and environmental degradation while managing simultaneously expressing love and compassion for the weak, bewildered, and lonely people. He writes journalistically, in short sentences and paragraphs, his characters are often deemed cartoonish or flat, and his stories and novels are crammed full of jokes. Vonnegut pairs simplicity with science-fiction, which some say detracts from his novels. His chaotic fictional universe abounds in wonder, coincidence, randomness and irrationality. Science fiction helps lend form to the presentation of this world view without imposing a falsifying causality upon it.

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Introduction

Vonnegut, an American novelist, fantasy writer, short story writer, and playwright, is one of America's best-known and most influential writers of fiction. Kurt Vonnegut is considered a representative writer of Post-modern literature which is characterized by heavy reliance on techniques like fragmentation, paradox, and questionable narrators, and is often (though not exclusively) defined as a style or trend which emerged in the post-World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a reaction against **Enlightenment** thinking and Modernist approaches to **literature**, which arose around 1946. Writers and thinkers of the time extended the former modernist characteristics to the extreme. The wave of postmodern **literature** came about in the late-1960s and '70s, pioneered by writers like **Kurt Vonnegut** and John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. Other American postmodernist authors such as Robert Coover, E. L. Doctorow, Kurt Vonnegut and Paul Auster. 'Post-modernism' is used in critical theory to refer to point of departure for works of literature, drama, architecture, cinema, journalism and design, as well as in marketing and business and in interpretation of law, culture and religion in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. Postmodern literature is characterized by a disjointed, fragmented pastiche of high and low culture that reflects the absence of tradition and structure in a world driven by technology.

Vonnegut's name appears topmost in the list of postmodernist authors who have propounded a dark, disordered view of America in particular and the planet in general. He is presenting the true picture of the state of mind that prevailed throughout 1960's and 1970's. Kurt Vonnegut is the true representative of postmodernist fiction. While his style tends to be simple and accessible—he uses a conversational tone, short chapters, and almost childlike descriptions at times—his subject matter is often very serious. Vonnegut's playful, humorous, and deceptively simple style of storytelling made his work accessible to a large audience. His fiction illustrates the pressing literary, philosophical, and social concerns of the late 20th century. But perhaps most important thing is that Vonnegut's fiction offers a scathing critique of social injustice, war, and environmental degradation while managing simultaneously expressing love and compassion for the weak, bewildered, and lonely people.

His best known works are *Player Piano* (1952), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969; filmed 1972), and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). He continued writing short stories and novels, including *Jailbird* (1979), and *Deadeye Dick* (1982). Vonnegut even made himself the subject of *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (1981). His last novel was *Timequake* (1997), which became a best seller despite receiving mixed reviews. Kurt Vonnegut chose to spend his later years working on nonfiction. His last book was *A Man Without a Country*, a collection of biographical essays. In it, he expressed his views on politics and art as well as shed more light on his own life. Known for his outspoken political opinions, Vonnegut also produced a host of essays, articles, and short stories. A number of his works have been translated into television or film, and he graced a few of these with cameo appearances. Vonnegut was also a graphic artist, and illustrated a number of his works himself.

Vonnegut pairs simplicity with science-fiction, which some say detracts from his novels. *The Sirens of Titan* is a science fiction novel. *Mother Night*, joins two other genres (the spy story and war memoirs). Many of his early short stories were wholly in the science fiction mode. Vonnegut has typically used science fiction to characterize the world and the nature of existence as he experiences them. His chaotic fictional universe abounds in wonder, coincidence, randomness and irrationality. Vonnegut has typically used science fiction to characterize the world and the nature of existence as he experiences them. In *Galpagos*, the main storyline is told chronologically, but the author frequently mentions the outcome of future events (referring to 1985 as being one million years in the past). Vonnegut often employs this technique in his books, including his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut uses fictional elements such as 'aliens', 'time travel' and the supportive myth of unconventional sex in the central narrative arc to drive home his message.

He writes journalistically, in short sentences and paragraphs, his characters are often deemed cartoonish or flat, and his stories and novels are crammed full of jokes. As a Postmodern novel relying on metafiction, the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* is a writer's preface about how he came to write his novel. It is a strategy of making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the readers. Within the limits of such a realization, *Slaughterhouse Five* highlights such aspects of the text, which attempt a dissolution of linear conventional narrative, thus questioning the aesthetic and temporal philosophy of realism, to be seen in the light of the novel's historical, cultural and theoretical contexts. Postmodernist writers employ this technique to undermine the existence of the narrative primacy within the text, the presence of a single all-powerful authority. For instance, the first sentence of the novel reads: "All this happened more or less" (SHF1) and their view of the world. The author later appears in Billy's World War II as another sick prisoner which the narrator notes by saying, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (SHF.1). The narrator of the novel reports that Billy Pilgrim has come "unstuck in time" on account of his

traumatic experience in the wake of the Dresden air-raid. Billy undergoes the experiences of his life discontinuously (ie. he experiences past and future events out of sequence and repetitively, following non-linear narrative).

Vonnegut's novel is not only a fabulation based on science fiction but it is also a collage of factual reporting and fantasy writing. As a fabulation, it seeks to satisfy our elementary appetites such as wonder, suspense and wish-fulfilment. It certainly feeds on popular myths and fantasies like *Voyage into Space* (Tralfamadore) and all forms of unconventional sex. As a reportage, the story is told in short, declarative sentences that impress the sense of reading a report of facts. Like a true reporter, Vonnegut describes the firebombing of Dresden and the various incidents connected with this disaster. The story continually employs the refrain "so it goes", (SHF.4) when death, dying and mortality occur, as a narrative transition to another subject, as a memento mori, as comic relief and to explain 'the unexplained'. It's combination of simplicity, irony and rue is very much in the Vonnegut vein. Hocus Pocus employs a "fragmentary" construction ie. short passages ostensibly written on scraps of paper and not intended for "publication" and frequent direct allusions to or mentions of other of the author's works. These devices are taken "all the way" in *Bluebeard*, which on one reading is a sequence of personal vignettes wherein the author, Kurt Vonnegut, writes himself into the book as a "character" on a more "literal" level than even he did before it, with exceptions.

Since, postmodernism represents a 'decentred' concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations; the main focus in the study of postmodern literature is on 'intertextuality'. In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as in other postmodern works, certain characters cross over from other stories, making cameo appearances, connecting the discrete novels as a greater opus. For instance, science fiction novelist Kilgore Trout, often an important character in other novels is shown as a social commentator and a friend to Billy Pilgrim. Other crossover characters are Eliot Rosewater from *God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater*, Howard W. Campbell from *Mother Night* and Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, relative of Winston Niles Rumfoord from *The Sirens of Titan* (1959). Mr. Rosewater says that Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* contains 'everything there was to know about life'. The fact that Billy reads *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966) and participates in a radio talk show on '*The Death of the Novel*' underlines the deliberate proliferation of texts within the main text, otherwise known, as 'intertextuality'. It is an important postmodern device by which Vonnegut brings into question 'the authenticity' of the text.

These devices of meta-fiction is also be expanded to include Vonnegut's approach to character introductions, and character development. In opposition to the common, Vonnegut observes his characters from an almost omniscient perspective; for example, "His name is Andor Gutman. Andor is a sleepy, not very bright Estonian Jew." (MN.145) While this style of character deconstructionism is less

prevalent in *Mother Night* than it is in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, or *Breakfast of Champions*, the pervading-style of prose throughout the book is largely intertwined with, meta-fictional techniques. All postmodern writings make allusions which range from history to scientific works. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Fives* speaks of the firebombing of Dresden in World War II and refers to the Battle of the Bulge, the Vietnam War, and the Black anti-poverty racial riots in American cities in the 1960s. Billy's wife Valencia Merble wears a 'Reagan for President!' bumper sticker on her car, referring to Reagan's failed 1968 Republican Presidential nomination campaign. Vonnegut's novel has little conventional plot, its unit is the brief paragraph and the cartoon drawing by the author, and its characters are as flat as those figures in the cartoon creations, and yet the basic, affirmative humanism of Vonnegut who is drawn into his work as a character, too remains always clear, especially when he sets free his characters to live on their own outside his imagination. In *Breakfast of Champions*, the various themes and mannerisms that have animated the earlier novels are seen here in a grotesque, cartoon version of themselves. A kind of minimalism has always characterized Vonnegut's prose, and it is the first thing we notice in *Breakfast of Champions*. The Narrator introduces *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the novel's genesis and ends discussing the beginning and the end of the Novel. The story purports to be a disjointed, discontinuous narrative, from Billy Pilgrim's point of view, of being unstuck in time. Vonnegut's writing usually contains such disorder. The result is a colloquial anti-novel, a further break from the confines of realistic fiction. Vonnegut undercuts suspense by revealing his plot in the first few chapters. *Cat's Cradle* is the novel which best exemplifies the methods and techniques of Kurt Vonnegut. It illustrates almost every device, technique, attitude and subject we encounter in Vonnegut, and is filled with particulars which echo other novels. The world according to Vonnegut appears absurd, and life within it generally seems ultimately meaningless. Space and time travel, war, and madness become the appropriate vehicles for describing such a condition.

Vonnegut populates his novels with characters searching for meaning and order in an inherently meaningless and disorderly universe. In his novels, characters are subservient to his ideas. Kurt Vonnegut's works seldom have a villain and hero characters. The lack of real villains and heroes seems an almost inevitable consequence of the vision of the world Vonnegut creates. All human beings in his literary works are little pathetic things which seem to be led by a Master Puppeteer from above and therefore cannot be responsible for what they do and thus cannot be considered to be villain. The Tralfamadorians, of course, take this completely to heart. As the narrator informs us, "Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the universe is a machine" (SHF 133). Vonnegut takes this to a logical extreme in *Breakfast of Champions* where he occasionally delights in describing how people are acting, right down to which hormones are being secreted to cause which other hormones to be secreted, in order to cause a specific action to occur.

They are also prevented from exercising their free will is through habit or conditioning. In *Player Piano*, many characters have surrendered their lives to society's idea of what is acceptable and proper. In *Timequake*, since the characters had no control over their bodies during the timequake, when it ended, they were unable to manage their bodies' actions. In the book, this is given the name: "Post-Timequake Apathy, or PTA" (T.113). By simply going where life takes them, those people have completely relinquished their ability to act freely. In a way, this is worse than the situation in *Player Piano* because, in that case, people were locked in by society, whereas in this case people are locked in by their minds. Habits of life can and do prevent Vonnegut's characters from exercising free will. Another way in which characters in Vonnegut's books cannot exercise free will is a result of the restrictions imposed by unchangeable destinies. Characters' fate is often predetermined and thus their actions cannot effect change. *Cat's Cradle*, the narrator once comments, "As it happened - 'as it was supposed to happen,' Bokonon would say..." (c.c. 235).

By viewing contemporary life on Earth from a distant time or planet, or in the context of wide ranges of time and space, or through the eyes of an alien observer, Vonnegut can create at least the impression of a detached perspective on the human lot. Vonnegut openly addresses himself in the role of creator "on a par with the Creator of the Universe," and with a Prospero-like gesture releases the characters from his earlier fiction. He also talks freely of his own personal experiences, including his mother's suicide and his relationship with his psychiatrist. Vonnegut calmly confesses that "it is a big temptation to me, when I create a character for a novel, to say that he is what he is because of faulty wiring, or because of microscopic amounts of chemicals which he ate or failed to eat on that particular day." (MN.4.) The common metafictional portrayal of the author as God appears when the characters refer to the author as the "Creator of the Universe" At the novel's conclusion, the author reveals to Trout his status as a character, saying, "Mr. Trout . . . I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books." (BC.105). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut as the author of the book actually turns himself into one of the main characters in his novel and the existence of the authorial voice and the development of the characters are mutually dependent. The characters need the author as much as the author needs his characters in the text.

Deadeye Dick explores themes of social isolation and alienation that are particularly relevant in the postmodern world. Society is seen as openly hostile or indifferent at best, and popular culture as superficial and excessively materialistic. Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* is a bleakly comic postmodern reflection on literature and language. Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* aims to entertain, raise our self awareness, and nudge us towards questioning the fundamental 'myths' that underpin our society: science, religion, and a belief in our ability to make our own destinies. Despite his mastery of the prose medium and a sense of the ridiculous, Vonnegut never abandons himself to relentless verbal

cleverness. Less generally familiar than the fiction, however, are Vonnegut's creations in the graphic arts. These reveal the same postmodern heterogeneity of mode and subject found in the fiction-realism and abstraction, the fantastic and the mundane, sentiment and irony, humor and melancholy. Vonnegut's work as a graphic artist began with his illustrations for *Slaughterhouse-Five* and developed with *Breakfast of Champions*, which included numerous felt-tip pen illustrations. Later in his career, he became more interested in artwork, particularly silk-screen prints, which he pursued in collaboration with Joe Petro III. Using his famous brand of satire and wit, Vonnegut captures twenty-first century America as only he could foresee it. In *Hocus Pocus*, listeners find a fresh novel, as fascinating and brilliantly offbeat as anything he's written.

Like other postmodernist writers as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut is also an eminent social satirist. Imbibing the postmodern spirit, writers use satire not so much as an instrument of correction but as a mode of questioning arid problems. Evolving a kind of satire which is named as 'deconstructive satire' for it stems from or resembles Derrida's. Like postmodern novelists as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, the satire of Kurt Vonnegut, depicts vision of a decentered world is, therefore, in a sense deconstructive. It questions and problematizes traditional ideologies. Known for his iconoclastic humor, Vonnegut consistently satirizes contemporary society, focussing in particular on the futility of warfare and the human capacity for both irrationality and evil. *Player Piano* is futuristic and explores the relationship between changing technology and the lives of ordinary humans. *The Sirens of Titan* is a science fiction parody in which all of human history is revealed to have been manipulated by aliens to provide a space traveler with a replacement part for his ship. This novel, as well as the critically acclaimed *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, exhibits Vonnegut's unique combination of black humor, wit, and pessimism. *Cat's Cradle* is an apocalyptic satire on philosophy, religion, and technological progress while *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* concerns the idealistic attempts of an alcoholic philanthropist, Eliot Rosewater, to befriend the poor and helpless. Rosewater finds, however, that his monetary wealth cannot begin to alleviate the world's misery. Like Rosewater, Vonnegut's protagonists are idealistic, ordinary people who strive in vain to understand and bring about change in a world beyond their control or comprehension. Vonnegut tempers his pessimistic, sometimes caustic commentary with compassion for his characters, suggesting that humanity's ability to love may partially compensate for destructive tendencies. In *Mother Night*, an American agent who posed as a Nazi propagandist during World War II undergoes a personality crisis when tried for crimes he committed to insure his covert identity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, perhaps Vonnegut's best-known work, the author confronts his personal experience as a prisoner of war who survived the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden, a city of little military or strategic value.

Throughout his writing career, Vonnegut uses similes, metaphors, the jumping from one subject to another, and irony for portraying his many ideas. Vonnegut uses similes and metaphors for evoking emotions in his readers, to portray his ideas and to question the motives behind many things. He uses irony in the novel was to describe the shooting of an American soldier for stealing a teapot after the Bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut writes "The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot." (SHF.5) He displays the irony of the reaction a woman gave when told of the gruesome details of the death of man after the bombing of Dresden had occurred. He says, "When I got back to the office, the woman writer asked me, just for her own information, what the squashed guy looked like when he was squashed....I told her...'Didn't it bother you?' she said. She was eating a Three Musketeers Bar." (SHF.9)

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is known for satire, dark humor or black humour, science fiction, and pessimism. He wrote about tragically horrible moments but made them so funny. Noted for their frank and insightful social criticism as well as their innovative style, his works present an idiosyncratic yet compelling vision of modern life. *Bluebeard* is largely a fictional autobiography of Karabekian, and is told primarily as a first person narrative. Vonnegut's major novels speak against man's position as romantic centre of the universe. In his 2005 collection of essays, *A Man Without A Country*, he accused President George W. Bush of gathering "around him upper-crust C-students who know no history or geography". (p.31). Vonnegut uses both satire and irony in the novel, and yet these types of humour are not predominant. In *Cat's Cradle*, he pokes fun at serious ideas. Vonnegut sees laughter as one of only two ways of resolving fundamental frustrations such as these. The dark, tough, apocalyptic quality of Vonnegut's vision results from his hard-minded recognition that we do commit sins against ourselves which need to be exorcised. But he dresses that perception in the fable's soft fabric, moral fibers and all, because he sees love as the proper instrument of exorcism, and the fable as the proper form for the expression of the artist's love. He is a pacifist and he argues for simple, humane values. The simple style with which Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. writes his novels belies complexity hidden behind his sentences. Vonnegut's novels, as a result, are amazingly easy and, to many, enjoyable to read, yet they contain messages that go to the very root of humanity, messages that are not hidden underneath flowery prose.

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