

The Effect of the Use of Parody in the Slaughterhouse-Five on Vonnegut's War Trauma Writing

Jia Wo^{1,a,*}

¹Chinese University of Hong Kong, Ma Liu Shui, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong, China
a. 51202901128@stu.ecnu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: The parody in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not—as scholar Fredric Jameson defined—a postmodern literary strategy. However, there is currently little research on the “non-postmodern” character of this postmodern text. This study will start with the technique of “parody” and challenge Jameson's description of the characteristics of postmodern literature to prove that the novel's war trauma writing contains a “non-postmodern” value judgment. This essay will refer to the interpretation of scholars such as Neil D Isaacs, and find the moral center which contributes to the frequent use of parody through the analysis of the details of the text. Perhaps the use of parody in this novel can serve as a complement to postmodern literary thought. The above attempt may complement Jameson's definition of postmodern literature, and it can also fill the research gap created by the postmodernity analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Keywords: Postmodern, Parody, Anti-war, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

1. Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* in a unique way. His decontextualized and fragmented historical writing is in line with the “disappearance of a sense of history” in postmodern literature/art described by literary theorist Fredric Jameson [11]. Nevertheless, Vonnegut's ways of writing current experience and history does not fully correspond to Jameson's exposition of postmodern works. Jameson considered that “pastiche eclipses parody” is one of the main features of postmodern literature. Parody is ironic, with a value judgment behind it, but pastiche is neutral. “Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour” [11]. Under the postmodern context, “parody has become impossible” [11]. However, Vonnegut's references to historical events and religious books is more like parody than pastiche. The underlying value identification—“anti-war”—in this novel may helps us find some “non-postmodern” elements in Vonnegut's novel, or it may extend the connotation of “postmodern literature”.

Focusing on the postmodern features of Vonnegut's works, many scholars have analyzed the text from different perspectives, such as Lawrence R Broer's psychological perspective and Kevin A Boon's application of chaos theory [2,3]. Other scholars focus on the use of anti-hero narrative, fragmented collage, parody and other techniques. Some of them have emphasized Vonnegut's authorship, and discussed his writing techniques from his identity as a science fiction writer, a black humorist, or a postmodern writer. However, these analyses do not take into account the “non-postmodern” aspects of the novel or explain why a postmodern author show strong value judgments

in his work. As a complement, Neil D. Isaacs have explored the anti-war ideas in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He commented: "First and foremost, it is an anti-war document, conceived in anguish for firebomb-destroyed Dresden and dedicated to the propositions that war is an absurd assertion of man's will, that it must be revealed in all its absurdity" [9]. This essay will refer to this argument by Issacs to challenge Jameson's views on postmodern texts, showing the use of parody with a moral center in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and how it complements the characteristics of postmodern literature.

This study will start from exploring the representation of historical experience by postmodern and non-postmodern techniques in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Section II will be divided into two parts. First, it is necessary to clarify the difference between "pastiche" and "parody", and verify whether the novel adopts "parody" with a moral center. Then, the function and purpose of these techniques in Vonnegut's historical construction and war trauma writing can be understood through an analysis of the typical postmodern features in the text. In Section III, the novel will be placed in the social and historical context of postmodernism, and will be analyzed against the views of scholars such as Jameson to understand whether Vonnegut's novels are out of sync with postmodernist literature. First, I am going to discuss the distance condition provided by postmodern techniques for parody. The second part is to further explore the value of the seemingly "non-postmodern" part of Vonnegut's novel, or its complement to postmodernist literary theory.

2. The Role of Postmodern and Non-postmodern Techniques in Expressing War Trauma

2.1. Parody Eclipses Pastiche: Non-Postmodern Approaches in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, scholars discussed the definition and important representations of postmodern literature and art. Literary theorist Fredric Jameson argued that one of the main features of postmodern narrative strategy is the use of "pastiche". To further clarify the claim, Jameson made a distinction between "parody" and "pastiche". In his view, "parody" is not so much a feature of postmodern literature as it is "what Wayne Booth calls the stable and comic ironies of the eighteenth century" [11]. It "capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original [11]." Parody is closer to a sort of "dialogue" with modernity, while Not a "deconstruction" of modernity. This is also the unreliability of parody in Jameson's opinion. It guarantees the continuation of style and ideological discourse, so it is still possible to restore the prestige of classic discourse. Therefore, Jameson believed that only "pastiche" or "blank parody" can guarantee the purity of postmodern cultural intentions in literary and artistic works.

But the fact is that although *Slaughterhouse-Five* is widely regarded as a postmodern novel by academic circles, it does not fully match the postmodern literary phenomenon that Jameson called "pastiche eclipses parody" [11]. The novel has repeatedly implied the relationship between religious texts, historical events and fictional stories. The use of intertextuality in the novel have a clear purpose and function of meaning construction. For example, *Slaughterhouse Five*'s protagonist Billy Pilgrim is a parody of Christians in *The Pilgrim's Progress* [2]. Meanwhile, the subtitle of the book "Children's Crusades" is a parody of the Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries. In this historical movement, more than 30,000 children set off from Germany and Italy under the coaxing of the Pope to start a "holy" Eastern crusade with the purpose of going to Palestine and retaking Jerusalem from the Turks. They were asked to complete the unfinished business of the "adults". People at that time believed that adults are guilty, so only pure children can reclaim the Holy Land. Sadly, only a small number of them arrived in Genoa, Italy, and some of them arrived in Marseilles, France, and were trafficked to Egypt as slaves. Most tragically, more than half of them died in the shipwreck, so none of them ended up in Jerusalem. The movement cost the lives of thousands of innocents, but romantic works lavishly portray its piety and heroism.

Vonnegut's original intention was obviously not to pay tribute to the Crusades with the subtitle. Through his parody of the Crusades, we can learn that war was exactly what he wanted to satirize. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator concluded that the main force of all wars were "babies", who were deceived by romanticization. The first chapter of the novel reveals that in order to write a novel about Dresden, Billy Pilgrim visited his wartime friend to help him recall more details of the war. Mary, the friend's wife, was furious when she heard their conversation: "You'll pretend you were man instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot to more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs [13]." The novel mentions two Charismatic and belligerent movie actors Frank Sinatra and John Wayne, played tough guys in war movies and lured many young men to the battlefield. From the narrator's point of view, the American soldiers who participated in World War II had similar views on the war, because many movies and books tried their best to glorify and preach war without mentioning its cruel side. This view challenges the romantic narrative, is markedly anti-war and anti-heroic, and is clearly not a "blank parody".

2.2. Postmodern Techniques Express the Reshaping of Western Enlightenment Concepts by Experience of War

This is not to say that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which used parody, is a modern or even pre-modern novel without any postmodern features. The above argument is just an attempt to clarify that the novel's "postmodernity" has a more complex fusion relationship with the "parody" techniques. In fact, it is easy to find the typical features of postmodern literature in this fiction. The organization of the historical narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is consciously different from traditional literature. Vonnegut's organization method of combining virtual and real, combining daily trivia with grand narrative, is certainly in line with what Jameson called the "disappearance of a sense of history" in postmodern art [11]. Furthermore, the novel emphasizes (non-transcendental) sensual experience, writing trivia such as "a print of the first dirty photograph" owned by a soldier called Roland Weary [13]. These details all reflect the spiritual core of *Slaughterhouse-Five* to a certain extent, that is to say, the novel opposes and deconstructs modern discourses such as enlightenment rationality, grand narrative and identity from the perspective of postmodernism. In addition, although Vonnegut used the "parody" that Jameson excluded from the postmodern characters, he still used some typical postmodern writing techniques such as meta-narratives and non-linear narratives. Beneath his seemingly inconsistent techniques, there is a common motivation.

In order to understand this motivation, it is necessary to first explore the reasons for Vonnegut's use of meta-narratives, non-linear narratives and other techniques for historical writing, and to sort out the "postmodern" aspect of the novel. The plot in *Slaughterhouse-Five* has long been regarded as a quasi-autobiographical or semi-autobiographical novel because of its involvement in the Dresden air raid that the author experienced in World War II. The experience of Bombing reshaped the way Vonnegut experienced time and space, which is not difficult to see in the way the novel is organized. Furthermore, many similarities can be found by comparing Vonnegut's and his character Billy's experiences. They were both born in 1922, were captured by German troops on the battlefield of World War II. They were all sent to Dresden, where they were locked up to work in a factory that produced maltose syrup. After they survived, they were both retired in 1945 and returned to college. Vonnegut even mentioned in a collection of political discourses that he did visit his friend Bernie O'Hare's house for inspiration, and was accused by his wife Mary in reality [12]. However, instead of writing and publishing a non-fictional historical text, the author chose to write a story about a story, and create a historical writing about historical writing. He emphasized the fictional nature of the novel at the very beginning: "All this happened, more or less. The was parts, anyway, are pretty much true

[13].” Meanwhile, Vonnegut presented Billy’s process of creating science fiction stories in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For Vonnegut, the lines between truth and fiction are blurred in war writing.

Therefore, Vonnegut used meta-narrative techniques to create this elusive story to emphasize the “historicity of the text” and the “textuality of history”. The former came from his personal experience in World War II, and the latter came from his representation and deconstruction of the writing process of history. For Vonnegut, history and literature are equally discourses. He showed the readers how history and war were recorded because “the past is lost forever”. Maurice Halbwachs stressed that “our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present [7].” History writing is not a process of restoring history through the accumulation of individual memories, but is premised on presentism. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, German journalists “took pictures of Billy’s and Roland Weary’s feet...as heartening evidence of how miserable equipped the American Army often was, despite its reputation for being rich [13].” They constructed the “historical memory” needed by the moment by reshaping scenes, photographic composition, and using rhetoric, thereby influencing people’s cognition and behavior. The construction of collective memory is based on the framework of group memory, which shapes the common experience of a social organization and affects their future.

Vonnegut has a deep understanding of the impact of collective memory construction on people’s current behavior and future. Before the Vietnam War, the phenomenon of war was portrayed as a romantic act of heroism. In Vonnegut’s view, it was this kind of collective memory construction that caused young people to rush to the battlefield pointlessly. When *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written, America was in an “eventful time” of chaos and turmoil. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; Conflict erupted in the South as blacks and their supporters struggled to overturn centuries of racial prejudice; Young people rebelled against parental values and the authority of government; Traditional American values have been deeply shaken...Vonnegut’s novel can be regarded as a reaction to the incredible social tensions of the late 1960s (not just the Vietnam War). When *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published, the anti-war proposition in the novel was in line with the mentality of ordinary American people. With the defeat of the US military in Vietnam, the public gradually recognized the truth from the huge ruins.

The Vietnam War greatly reduced the public’s sense of trust in the government, and it also broke the Western concept of “justice” about war, which inspired an anti-war upsurge. As a result, Vonnegut portrayed warriors in novels as little babies who didn’t know what they were doing. He also described the bombing of Dresden as “the largest massacre in European history...It was pure nonsense, pointless destruction [12].” In Vonnegut’s novel, war is not glorious, but full of meaningless death and trauma. The brave tough guys in war films were replaced by a schizophrenic anti-hero character Billy, and the merciful, almighty God was replaced by some authoritative aliens capable of bombing the Earth. Through parody, the author connected the past with the present. At the same time, he connected the naked individual experience with the world of meaning formed by history, religion, and political discourse, in order to question the guarantees of the justice of war in mainstream war writing. He replaced the “reality” of the romantic war narrative with another kind of “reality”—the trauma of war.

To achieve this goal, the narrator of the novel denied the previous interpretation of the meaning of war in historical writing. He turned his back on the linear, deterministic writing of history that claimed absolute truth. Because “our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change [11].” In response to this new “reality”, *Slaughterhouse-Five* ingeniously weaves historical experience with science fiction. The character in the story sometimes returned to Nazi concentration camps, and sometimes lived on future planets, crossing the boundaries of time and space. Billy is “the Alpha and

the Omega”, just like God in the Bible. For him, “All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist”. However, the immortality he had on Tralfamadore was only the result of fantasy and schizophrenia, and at the cost of eternal mental torment. So he has experienced eternal change and suffering, which is the exact opposite of the eternal peace promised by Christianity. In this sense, the “ever-changing” view of time in the novel is also a parody of the “ever-lasting life” promised by religion.

“The eclipse of inner time (and its organ, the ‘intimate’ time sense) means that we read our subjectivity off the things outside.” [11] It may be inferred that the experience of the character in the novel suffering from time spasm, losing the sense of time, and switching randomly in space is also the manifestation of his inner and subjective feelings. Vonnegut’s reconstruction of “truth” shows how modern experiences and trends of thought have changed the way people perceive history, time and space. More importantly, the traumatic experience of war witnesses was concretely displayed in this way.

3. The Historical and Ideological Conditions of Parody and Its Effects of Expressing Anti-war Moral Judgments

3.1. Reconstruction of the “Truth” Creates Distance Conditions for Parody

Vonnegut's reconstruction and presentation of the “truth” is rather subtle. On the one hand, references to the real world give *Slaughterhouse-Five* some authenticity. On the other hand, people can clearly distinguish the fiction of the novel. Meta-fiction, with its strong reflexivity and “anti-realism” attitude, destroys the main condition of fiction's sense of reality. Furthermore, narratives that combines virtuality and reality, as well as the postmodern techniques of nonlinear narrative and meta-narrative, have created distance between the fictional text and real events—which provided conditions for the use of parody. Hutcheon points out that parody is “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity [9].”

The distance from reality in *Slaughterhouse-Five* does indeed provide the basis for its ironic effect. So Vonnegut jokingly referred to the glorious warriors of war stories as “babies”. He first parodied traditional heroic novels, endowed his characters with romantic images of heroism, and then deconstructed and mocked them. For example, Roland Weary embellished his exhausted experience with Billy into the glorious story of “The Three Musketeers”, from which it is not difficult to see Weary’s pursuit and imitation of traditional heroes and their “comradeship”. But actually, Weary and Billy were abandoned by the two scouts. “Weary was crying because of horrible pains in his feet. The hinged clogs were transforming his feet into blood puddings [13].” The author also satirically wrote about a drunken German soldier who spit on an American. “He spit on the Americans. The spit hit Roland Weary’s shoulder, gave Weary a fourragère of snot and blutwurst and tobacco juice, and Schnapps [13].” The book is full of such antihero characters. Vonnegut stressed that there is nothing wise to say about war, “The truth is death” [13]. He was well aware of the absurdity and cruelty of war, so he abandons the linear and orderly “smart words” and replaced them with non-linear and chaotic “nonsense”. This is probably the ideological basis of the anti-war narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The idea of “anti-war” in the novel came from Vonnegut's discovery of some “gaps”. There is a gap between the classic war narrative and the brutality of real war. This gap further points to the gap between collective memory and individual experiences. Through the subtitle and the mouth of Mary, the novel expresses those “gaps”. Perhaps it can be said that the discovery of the above-mentioned gaps prompted Vonnegut to question mainstream historical narratives and express his anti-war position through postmodern literary techniques such as meta-narratives. It is not difficult to see his antipathy to war. The anti-war attitude is not purely out of a speculative process on questions such as

“what is real”, but out of a response to wars and traumas that have actually occurred in history. As a result, a clear attitude is contained in the technique of “parody”.

The novel has a moral center, so it no longer fits Jameson's definition of postmodern literature, nor does it have “the purity of postmodern cultural intentions in literary and artistic works”. However, in Hutcheon's view, postmodernists does not necessarily need to shy away from serious, politically purposive dimension. “To include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art [9].” For specific serious purposes, “parody” can certainly be seen as the main feature of postmodern literature. If interpreted from Hutcheon's point of view, the “parody” in *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not prevent it from being accepted as postmodern literature. Because postmodern literature is not necessarily “blank” and meaningless—which is actually impossible—but only needs to show the process of sense-making. If readers can see the author's process of constructing an “anti-war” morality, then the novel will still maintain its openness and diversity in meaning.

3.2. Parody in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Supplements Postmodern Literary Thought

Nonetheless, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has limited openness to its meaning, especially compared to some of the more destructive and subversive postmodern literature. Ihab Hassan indicated that the two core principles of postmodernism are “indeterminacy” and “immanence [8].” “Indeterminacy” refers to postmodernism's abandonment of binary opposition, the interpretation and pursuit of ultimate meaning. “Immanence” means that postmodern literature is no longer interested in transcendental values such as spirit and truth. At first glance, Billy's fictional sci-fi story breaks the conventional narrative sequence, but replaces it with psychological time. He traveled between history and future, reality and fiction, irony and seriousness. However, regarding his war experience, the novel is still narrated in chronological order, and the plot presents completeness and closure. In addition, the ultimate meaning of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is still relatively certain. The author's deconstruction of the old concept of legitimacy and justice of war is to create a new “justice”, that is, the concept of anti-war. In describing the process of artistic development, Jameson points out that postmodern art abolishes “the self-transcendence of the aesthetic towards something else [11].” “For us art no longer counts as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself [11].” However, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s focus on the future of mankind shows a transcendence that postmodern texts do not have. Vonnegut did not fully accept the “death of the author” pronounced by scholars such as Roland Barthes, but remained authoritative in his “scriptible” text and anti-war narrative. Moreover, except for the first chapter of the novel, the “meta-narrative” reference to the fictional nature of the novel no longer appears in the following chapters. Therefore, in the second half of the novel, the author's emphasis on “truth” shows some characteristics of realism and even magic realism. This seems to imply that Vonnegut was also influenced by the “Boom Latinoamericano” of the 1960s.

The variety of literary trends in the 1960s can explain the source of Vonnegut's diverse styles. Whereas, this can not explain why *Slaughterhouse-Five* is out of sync with the development of postmodern novels of the same period. Perhaps the answer lies precisely in Jameson's analysis of postmodern style and its background. He explained that the reason why postmodern art pastiched and paid tribute to the works of the past, is due to the predicament that art encountered in late capitalism, “as though we had become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of Our own current experience [11].” Therefore, Jameson's “pastiche” is not only different from the “parody” that originated in the 18th century, but also different in motivation from the ancient Greek “mimetic theory”. “Mimesis” is an attempt to approach the ideal of perfection, “to attain a greater good, or to avoid a greater evil.” “Greater good” presupposes the existence of transcendental beauty [1]. But “pastiche” is the only thing that art can do after culture is depleted and transcendence is lost. “All that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the

imaginary museum [11].” The obsession with the “golden past” translates art into endless nostalgia. The nostalgia is, to put it bluntly, failure in the face of present reality or unknown future. The essence of “pastiche” is the weakness of facing the future.

However, Vonnegut's motivations for writing and the problems he faced were not the same as Jameson's picture of a postmodern consumerist society. The biggest difference between Vonnegut and the postmodernist writers of his time is that the question he is trying to answer is the never-ending psychological trauma of a self-proclaimed just war, not a late capitalist society. The theme of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is to reflect on the past, and naturally cannot get rid of the memory of the past, but this is far from “nostalgia”. The novel is not random, styleless, nostalgic, tribute. Instead, the style and reflexivity of it are evident. Arguably, *Slaughterhouse Five* was written for a specific purpose. Another reason that makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* seem different from the definition of postmodern literature is that, although literary theory tries to make a clear distinction between “parody”, “pastiche”, “mimesis”, etc., the boundaries between various techniques are not completely clear in actual writing. That is why Vonnegut's novels have some artistic features that spill over the definition of postmodernism. In other words, the variety of styles in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and its ambiguity as a postmodern work, also enriches our understanding of postmodern style.

4. Conclusions

The main question that this essay attempts to explore is whether the postmodern novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains some “non-postmodern” elements that have not been valued by the research community. Therefore, starting from the frequent use of “parody” in novels, this study analyzes the use of this non-postmodern technique and the conceptual support behind it, and refutes Jameson's definition of the main characteristics of postmodern literature.

According to Jameson, “pastiche” does not contain any value judgments, while “parody” has a moral center. However, “parody” is used in the novel instead of “pastiche”, which is commonly used in postmodern literature. When narrating war, Vonnegut chose its cruel side and expressed a clear attitude of ridicule, deconstruction and negation towards war. This phenomenon is not accidental, but precisely because Vonnegut is not trying to respond to late capitalist society like other postmodern writers. If we place Vonnegut's writing in the historical context of World War II and Vietnam War, and observe the intertwined and complex literary trends at that time, it is not difficult to understand why postmodern techniques such as metanarratives and “non-postmodern” techniques such as parody appear together in the novel. The reason why Vonnegut use these postmodern techniques is to question Western enlightenment, rational discourse, and to deconstruct grand narratives. When questioning the grand narrative/collective discourse, Vonnegut's meta-narrative and interweaving of virtuality and reality create a distance between “life” and “expression”. And this kind of distance creates conditions for parody. The postmodern techniques and “parody” in the novel seem to be separate literary techniques, but in fact come from responses to the same historical issues. Reflections on the wars of the 20th century prompted Vonnegut to reproduce the trauma of war. Thus, he naturally cannot avoid the “anti-war” moral center in his novel, which is quite different from the writing motivation of postmodern writers described in Jameson's theory.

As noted above, the current researches on this novel has not fully analyze the characteristics of the novel that do not conform to the postmodern literary trend. It is hoped that this study can fill this gap and discover the diversity of the issues of the era to which postmodern literature seeks to respond to. Discussion in this essay aims to demonstrate that *Slaughterhouse-Five* may enrich our understanding of postmodern ideas and the context in which they emerged.

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