

**SCIENCE-FICTION, POSTMODERNISM AND WAR FICTION
IN KURT VONNEGUT'S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many kinds of literature – serious or not serious – one particular genre, science fiction, seems to get a really bad reputation. Not just nowadays, but since its earliest appearances in the world of literature. Or at least since literary critics took the time to analyze and deconstruct it on a “professional level”. And even if it was not labeled science fiction up until the 1930s, this genre, somehow, was considered not to be a product of high-art, or to be more precise, artistic literature (Bould, 1-2). Even nowadays, if you walk in to book stores and libraries, science fiction narratives are very often – and almost exclusively – segregated into a corner usually in close proximity to children's books and erotic fiction. As if science fiction was not worthy of a higher prestige or should not be taken seriously, which is untrue. And neither is its readership safe from prejudices, with stereotypes ranging from geeky man-children to people with weird space-alien and robot-monster fetishes. Why this is so remains unclear to me, as science fiction offers the exact two things its name suggests: science and fiction.

Still, most literary critics used to think it was not something worthy of a higher reputation and usually said that no, science fiction is not literature. Opinions are now changing and hopefully people will realize as well that this more than a hundred year old genre does have its place among classic, and of course, the so-called “high art” literature. So how come one of the most famous books ever written, from one of the 20th century's most influential authors found its place in the genre of science fiction and tackled problems so serious, even Pulitzer Prize winning Hemingway made a career out of it? Beloved even by Vonnegut's contemporary critics (“Books of The Times”), and making it onto many top-whatever lists of our contemporaries (Lacayo), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) has become something of an achievement. It was great literature to begin with, had an arsenal of brilliant science fiction concepts, made social commentary and armed with a fun and engaging prose style, good humor, even managed to marry the science fiction genre with none other than war literature.

Since science fiction's validity as an actual, so to say “real” literary genre is a statement that is widely accepted nowadays. I do not want to get into the depths of the argument – although I will explore ideas that are absolutely necessary to get my point across – since the in-depth analysis of literary history is outside of this thesis' interests. I

am merely going to touch on a few aspects as to why *Slaughterhouse-Five* is such a brilliant achievement, because Kurt Vonnegut has managed to pull off not just a great science fiction book, not just a brilliant war narrative, but has done something that has since become a definition of his style and an example of postmodern fiction. In my thesis, I will analyze and discuss *Slaughterhouse-Five* from the perspectives of science fiction, war fiction and postmodernism and their storytelling methods.

One of the reasons for which I personally enjoy reading science fiction is the creativity and imagination the authors have with which they build worlds and weave plotlines. Of course, most science fiction authors are people who (1) have a deep understanding of plot development, characterization and world building, while letting go of their wild imaginations, just as good as the literary classics and (2) are authors who have had careers in science and have gathered experience through which they can think-up their imaginary future worlds and universes with fully fleshed-out and structured societies, politics and technological developments. These things take a lot of time to create, write and rewrite, and placing these ideas in a science fiction environment does not and should not degrade their qualities by any amount, whatever the naysayers believe.

In the following pages I am going to discuss aspects of science fiction, war fiction and postmodernism and use this research to discuss Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the first chapter I am going to deal with the definition of science-fiction and give a few examples on subgenres without delving too deep into them.

After I have discussed how science-fiction is so much more than what people who have watched *Space Balls* (1987) and *Star Wars* (1977) swear it is, I will answer why this genre can give a facelift to war fiction clichés and formulas and how it can take an absolutely brutal and serious topic such as World War II and make it fresh and new.

Then in the third chapter I will try and complete the seemingly impossible task of defining postmodernism and outline my points through which we can analyze works of art to find out if they are postmodern pieces.

Lastly, I will apply my findings to *Slaughterhouse-Five* and analyze it in these three aspects.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF ASPECTS

2.1. Science-fiction as a genre

Defining science-fiction is quite a challenge seeing how most websites and specific, science-fiction oriented libraries themselves run into lots of trouble trying to sort it out, usually giving up and condemning the pieces into even more obscure subgenres, leaving most people confused with pages-upon-pages of labels such as hard science fiction, alternate history, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, space opera, steampunk, cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk and science fiction erotica – which is no doubt a peculiar subgenre, and it surely must offer a lot to talk about, but nonetheless, I am not going to discuss any of these at all. There are plenty of examples online for those interested, for example in The Fantasy Magazine Staff's article which lists the then best pieces of steampunk literature.

Looking into literary accounts offers some guidance on defining science-fiction, but most of these essays end up listing sort of vague qualities, for example how science fiction is mostly grounded in science, and a few other aspects that can be applied to a large variety of literary works. There is one fairly well-rounded definition though, that seems to appear in more of the science-fiction oriented essays I came across during my research, which is about science fiction being the literature of the human species encountering change, whether it arrives via scientific discoveries, technological innovations, natural events, or societal shifts (McKitterick). But that is not all, because as Quentin Cooper said in a fairly recent BBC article:

The problem is the genre itself. Despite everyone having their own idea about what is and isn't science fiction, trying to usefully define it is harder than explaining how a flux capacitor works. It's a bit like attempting to describe a table to an alien: we all know what one is, but since it can be all sorts of different shapes and sizes, made of many different materials, may or may not have one or more legs and has multiple uses, how do you unambiguously convey what a table is so the alien would always identify it correctly?

Another aspect which makes it difficult to classify books as science fiction is the problem itself that arises from believing something to be a genre. According to Rick Altman, a genre is not some strange and divine concept in which a select few decide to write, or know the values and limitations of, but a genre is a value that comes after certain defining, key features have been developed through the creative process of many artists (Bould). Because of this reason, science fiction was not born out of nothing and certainly did not begin after a then-unknown person with decent writing skills sat up in his bed and invented it one morning, but has naturally evolved and progressed, and had taken a shape with unique characteristics and features which were recognized by followers of the then-blooming genre, to which other works of literature then were compared to in order to be classified as science fiction (Bould). So all in all, asking what is science fiction is almost like asking what is literature, to which there are whole semesters of college courses devoted to answer, and for the sake of this paper we will not ask that question.

Back to the questions on science fiction, the classification I discussed is not so easy to do anymore – again, because of all the subgenres that came to be since the appearance of the first few books. So for the purpose of this thesis, I am going to label *Slaughterhouse-Five* as science fiction.

Seeing how empirical knowledge is a key ingredient in the science fiction cocktail, it is not any wonder why authors like H.G. Wells, Jules Verne or even Mary Shelley are considered classics of the genre. Books like *The Time Machine* (1895), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), or *Frankenstein* (1818) all bring interesting new scientific concepts to the table on a reader's level, and mind-blowing, revolutionary concepts on a scientist's level. Parts that one half of the audience will praise for the enjoyment factor will be seen as something to begin research on by the other.

On the other hand, some writers take a different approach, and ask the always interesting question of “what if?”. It is an inquiry that most writers from any of the genres will explore one way or another, and a question which of course lots of speculative fiction authors have also asked. Other speculative fiction authors have come up with concepts that then went on to be regarded as firsts in their respective fields. Look no further than the most commonplace object in everyone's pocket: the mobile phone. It was influenced by old episodes of *Star Trek*. Or take a look at the submarine, inspired by *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. It is clear that science fiction has paved the way with its unending

arsenal of ideas that once were just in the heads of writers, to then become fully realized objects that nowadays we regard as commonplace, ordinary things, about which some of the 21st century, western people will even yawn at. So writing speculative fiction is not about making weird fan-fiction on Zorg from *The Fifth Element* (1997), because readers – hopefully – do not want that. Instead:

When readers are paying that much close attention to every hint and clue, the writer needs to have their internal logic, consistency of character and scene-setting absolutely nailed down. Readers have to be convinced that this unfamiliar world is solidly real if they're ever going to suspend disbelief and accept the unreal, whether that's magic and dragons or faster-than-light travel. [...] Which is why, done well, speculative fiction can be considerably harder to write than literary fiction (McKenna).

I think it is easy now to see why science fiction is so much more than what most everyone tends to think first hearing about it, or seeing it on TV. Science fiction has undeniably outgrown its old shell. Making science fiction outside of pulp has become an art in itself, something that finally gathered its own audience and standardized certain qualities to which future works of the genre were then compared to. For example, in 1968 – exactly a year before *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published – a then already-established director Stanley Kubrick turned to the genre and released his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Teamed up with British science fiction author, Arthur C. Clarke to coincidentally release the film and the novel in that year, Kubrick's movie adaptation became something of a cult classic, even if not in an instant. Panned by critics then, it is now regarded as a huge cinematic achievement, included on many “greatest films ever” lists (“Sight and Sound”). Even with all the praise it gets today, it was not the case back then. It was even predicted that Kubrick's *Space Odyssey* would “set major science-fiction movie making back another ten years” (Del-Rey). A really unfortunate statement coming from a contemporary of Kubrick, especially considering his affection for science fiction. So even if science fiction was not nearly as strange and unacceptable of a genre as it used to be much earlier, there still was occasionally some obvious trouble marrying science fiction to bouquets of serious ideas – at least in the film version, seeing how the novel became a success.

2.2. Developments of war fiction

Ideas do not come cheap. War, for example, obviously does not need an introduction as being a serious and symbolically resonant topic to write about, not just for science fiction authors, but the many people who described real-world events they experienced and turned into novel form. One of these famous “war authors” was Ernest Hemingway. He fought in both World War I and II and also had some experience in the Spanish Civil War. Still, he did not turn to science fiction as his preferred genre, but wrote several novels that eventually became famous and beloved classics, nowadays taught in literature classes. I really want to emphasize that a large chunk of this man's career was based just on his war experiences and his literature is now considered classic, so we can draw the conclusion that war fiction is indeed serious literature.

But having something to say and having an interesting idea is not going to be enough in itself, even if said idea is a really good one to begin with. Execution seems to be the key when any creative process is at hand because the need to hand in a well-written manuscript at the end of the day is as great as the need to have a brilliant idea in the first place. A fantastic idea does not hide a bad execution enough to make it unnoticeable, while bad execution can indeed spoil much of the things one has to say, however groundbreaking they may be. Of course, not all of the writers chose the straightforward path of hardcore war fiction to write about their war experiences. Some even distanced themselves as far from hard-core war fiction as they could, ending up on bookstore shelves miles from the “war fiction” aisles. For example J.D. Salinger, a friend of Ernest Hemingway coincidentally, was a man who saw much more death and destruction from up close than many of his contemporaries who then went on to write war fiction. Salinger saw and led prison camp interrogations, served in five war campaigns, earned the rank of staff sergeant and eventually had to be hospitalized for a few weeks because of combat stress reaction. Still, Salinger did not become famous because of war literature. He became famous as the author of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a book about a sixteen year old boy bumming around in New York City during the Christmas season. Salinger distanced himself from war so much that we can only guess how some of the questions Holden Caulfield asks might have been influenced by the author's war experiences. Nonetheless, *The Catcher in the Rye* was a hit and is even considered to be the Great American Novel of growing up.

Now it is safe to say that while Hemingway succeeded in his own way, and Salinger got to a point where whole semesters of college courses analyze his novel, almost going for it sentence-by-sentence, other authors might have become forgotten, or have become famous for reasons other than what this thesis is going to talk about. And that is how science fiction is a brilliantly effective way to convey the strangeness, pain and the not even remotely human and sometimes surreal nature of real war. Yes, writing a book with lots of blood and gore can give a perspective on this, but unless the writing also sets away a great deal of narrative on the internal struggle and psychological dilemmas of its characters without trying to be overly melodramatic, the overall experience that the book will convey may not be the same which an author supported by a very much “fiction-based” genre could give.

Speculative fiction may not mimic real life but it uses its magic mirror to reflect on the world around us. It's a fundamentally outward-looking genre, in direct contrast to literary fiction, which looks inward to explore the human condition. Setting a story in another place or another time enables speculative fiction to explore ideas that literary fiction might really struggle with (McKenna).

The never ending weirdness and distance between fiction and reality are perfect ways of shedding light on how it must have felt like to be on the battlefield and to experience all the horrible events that took place; unfortunately carried out by other human beings. Absurd things are all around us, especially in war. But sometimes people may get bored of or rather desensitized to these things, such as the many primary schoolers hearing about the children's crusade or drug prevention for a thousandth time in a row. I am not suggesting that either of these things should not be taught. I am simply trying to shed some light on why it could be done differently and why that would actually make you a memorable author or writer in the long run. It is a viewpoint commonly accepted that too much of a good thing makes it actually not so good. Yes, it might be nice for a while to have an abundance of war novels, but could that make a writer all that he wants to be, or in the end, will that author be classified as “that other war author”? Most likely a unique perspective and a different approach to old topics could make them so much more.

2.3. The postmodernist approach

Postmodern literature is often said to be difficult to comprehend, or even impossible to read, but seemingly unintelligible writing does not necessarily make a work of literature postmodern, no matter how hard certain undergraduate English students wish to argue about their research papers written as allnighters being “postmodern”. Even though *Ulysses* – still a modernist book, mind you – was accepted by literary critics as the most important work of literature from the twentieth century, many English majors – and of course the average person looking for a good read – claim that Joyce's magnum opus is just impossible to read and do not see why modernist literature is so groundbreaking or important. And while I agree with this statement to a certain degree and will say myself that many artists who claim to be the pinnacles of “postmodern high art” really just produce pretentious and culture-snobish material, I still think that this artistic movement has lots of valid and possibly unexplored ideas in it, that – again, if they are to be executed well – can really bend the minds of people, which is ultimately what postmodern art was intended to do in the first place. It should not be l'art pour l'art writing, it should be accessible to those who want to access it. And maybe Vonnegut just found a way of doing it by blending science fiction and war elements and also sneaking in postmodernist qualities.

Throughout the steps of progress which helped art develop from awkwardly drawn cave paintings into John Lennon and Yoko Ono awkwardly posing full frontal, there always were “eras” or art movements, so to say, and each of these eras and movements had unique characteristics that defined their aesthetic and philosophical aspects by which they could be analyzed and organized.

In the following paragraphs I will mainly use Dino Felluga's *General Introduction to the Postmodern* as my source. Other authors will be cited as usual.

The earliest known stories were written in the oral tradition without any laws or authors, written for the people and not for your own profit. There may not even have been a “Homer”, but the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* were definitely passed onto the coming generations. The renaissance and enlightenment then brought major changes to the previous “formula”, with printing, humanist thinking and a period of retrenchment. Reason, rationality and the self were the new tropes, wanting to understand the world through science to uncover the

“truth”. To an enlightened philologist, language needs to be transparent to describe the world as it is, as a de facto representation of its observations, perfection must be sought after and there can not be a conflict between what is true and what is right, as the science to uncover anything has to be (and according to philologists: is) neutral and objective.

But then what about the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Industrial revolution? Does urbanization and the rise of the middle classes once again change the literary perspective? Yes, it does.

Romanticism threw away most of what philologists coming from the era of Enlightenment though was “the way” and began valuing originality over convention, inspiring artists to push themselves further in their respective fields and thus put the emphasis on the individual and what it can achieve while at the same time trying to abandon the body and mind to find answers in the irrational. Drugs and nature were two of the common tropes to achieve this mental and physical state.

And so lastly – skipping ahead a few years in our timeline – we arrive at modernism, the period from 1898 to World War II, where experimentation was the norm for the contemporary artist, when art manifestos were written – such as Marinetti’s famous Futurist Manifesto –, “isms” were blooming, but art still found its way to have a few common features to define this hectic period of time. One of the most important aspects of modernist art is self-reflexivity which I will talk about in-depth when I get to postmodernism. Self-reflexivity is essentially being aware that your work of art is just that: a work of art, but it also means that the creation of that art can be the work of art itself, or the creative process itself could somehow appear in your finished piece, such as in Picasso’s 1956 painting: *Woman in the Studio*.

Another key modernist aspect is experimentation which can be expressed in different ways such as breaking down classical literary conventions – such as the barrier between poetry and prose – or representing objects from different perspectives at the same time just like cubists did.

Of course these new artistic methods created some rather ambiguous works of art that often broke down the distinction between high and low art forms and also may have been just fragmented pieces often parodying other works. But then again, all of these distinctions became “features”, describing modern art, so all is well.

And so we arrive at postmodernism, the focus of this chapter. Postmodernism is

basically the art movement that took everything from the beginning of oral culture all the way up to modernism and rejected their principles. Even though modernism itself was seen as something radical in its time, postmodernism has somehow managed to get its own place among all the other art movements for introducing even more radical and new ideas that go against the norm. By this point, art had already shifted away from the romantic admiration of nature and Victorian flowery writing and with experimental writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, there was a fuel for even more experimentation that finally lead into postmodernism.

The postmodern finally overthrew the image of the stereotypical “lone Romantic artist” trading it in for a new creative figure who takes existing ideas and recombines them to create something of his own. This tendency of taking previous works of art and reflecting on the creative process itself has been perfected in the form of collage which was virtually the outcome of using only already existing resources and turning them into something new (Morley).

To once again outline the process, we could differentiate art movements into three larger groups: the Premodern, the Modern, and the Postmodern. The Premodern period had a tendency to attribute meaning to the original creator while forcing the individual to accept the tradition so what has been understood as one thing had to be accepted as such. The Modern period then took the views of the Enlightenment and embraced change and progress, trying to objectify the world with science and reason. This is where view began shifting away from the Romantic's love for the genius lone artist. This shift was so large that Postmodernism wholly rejected the individual, emphasizing the collective experience (Morley).

In the end the qualities that differentiate the postmodern aesthetic from the modernist approach is postmodernism's tendency to be extremely self-reflexive with frequent use of irony to parody cultural or contemporary phenomena, a habit in trying to disorient the art recipient while questioning everything that is “sacred” and also presenting issues in an exaggerated, extremely distorted way.

I am not suggesting that maybe war and science fiction are kind of postmodernist “works of art” – although what may come out of it would no doubt be a controversial argument – but the similarities are apparent and have obviously influenced postmodernism itself.

In war we often find the complete obliteration of morals and values, see the people in a previously-working society as objects, twisted and turned inside out both metaphorically and physically and all the shady political and governmental things that were repressed during peacetime come spewing to the surface, questioning all that was seen as well and “sacred”.

3. ASPECTS OF SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

3.1. Origins of the novel

The subject that *Slaughterhouse-Five* deals with is very real: it is – at least for a good part – about the fire-bombing of Dresden; an experience that very much influenced Kurt Vonnegut's life. A really tragic and in many ways surreal experience, this war event inspired Vonnegut to go and write the book that has been for a long time considered one of his finest, going as far as to get nominated for both the Nebula, and the Hugo Awards, two of science-fiction's most prestigious awards. After all, he even straight-out tells in the first chapter to a man named Seymour “Sam” Lawrence what a tragedy all of it was and what a hard time he had trying to come up with a good story to tell saying:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. (30)

So in a sense he acknowledges that indeed, war is something twisted and surreal – just as *Slaughterhouse-Five* is – and all of that is simply because of how wars are in real life. But if that is the case, how Vonnegut – or any other war author for that matter – got to experience the fear and everything else in such a situation, is an interesting enough question worth asking before anything else.

During World War II Vonnegut was captured and imprisoned in Germany by the Nazis. All of this took place during the events of the actual bombing with Vonnegut eventually surviving the massacre (“Kurt Vonnegut”). The gravity of such a situation would easily be enough for anyone to inspire a book in them, but Vonnegut's experiences were so first hand and so incredibly ironic that some of these inspiration that went straight into the novel. One of these experiences is for example, the titular scene in the slaughterhouse. Vonnegut's imprisonment actually ended with him being placed in a German slaughterhouse referred to as *Schlachthof Fünf*, meaning he survived the slaughter in a slaughterhouse. Not even having to go in-depth with the “source material” so to say,

we can immediately see that the ironic, absurd and surreal qualities of such war experiences must influence a writer somehow. And seeing what kind of places does World War II take Billy Pilgrim during his journey through space and time, we can easily make the connections between his and Vonnegut's experiences.

And of course since postmodernism loves to turn everything we expect from literature upside-down we can almost guess that these real-life experiences must have gotten a new level of meaning to them, or at least some sort of a suggested realization behind them in how they themselves must be some kind of deformed, absurd renderings of what reality must seem like as it was seen through Vonnegut's eyes. And in turn, *Slaughterhouse-Five* may actually just point out that not everything is as we expect them to be, not everything is as it seems to be (Felluga). Before we go on though, I would like to point out making a connection between a fictional character or the narrator and the author is something you should not do when reading fiction and there is some evidence besides the more obvious ones that we will talk about later, that Billy Pilgrim is definitely not Vonnegut in a fictional form.

3.2. Postmodernist storytelling

Slaughterhouse-Five carries a lot of the aspects Felluga wrote about in his essay and carries them in nicely done fashion. First, there is the recurring theme of Lot and his escape from the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before going further, I would like to point out the obvious because it helps my thesis: the undeniable symbolic connection between Dresden and Sodom and Gomorrah. In the *Book of Genesis*, these two cities get destroyed with fire raining from the sky. Again, the connection is real: destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire – destruction of Dresden with firebombing. Second, there is the order from God not to turn around and watch the destruction itself. This passage gets mentioned in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well: “And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. She was turned to a pillar of salt.” (11) Vonnegut does the opposite, as he undoubtedly is looking back at his experiences and even calls himself a “failure” because for writing his book he was turned into a “pillar of salt” (11). He could choose not to do it, but somehow it seems he just can

not.

Billy Pilgrim on the other hand is completely powerless as to what is happening to him, at least taking into account the strange, but in a sense almost believable laws of Tralfamadorian and *Doctor Who* type of time perception. In a sense he is looking back. But in another sense this is just how time works for him. It is paradoxical enough, it disregards the limits of “reality” and shows how difficult and in some cases impossible it would be to follow Billy Pilgrim's mantra which is also a possible verbal expression or answer about the things he has to suffer through. The prayer goes: “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.” (268) This mantra is actually the so-called “*Serenity Prayer*”, written by the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, today adopted in many support groups and twelve-step programs (Shapiro). Without getting into spiritual discussions, this prayer, I believe, is a coping mechanism. Why it became so popular after the war could be attributed to people losing their families, homes and also hopes. They needed serenity to be able to deal with their often dire situations, but also needed courage to stand up against what they did not believe in. And with all the different political directions the world was going towards, they needed the wisdom to see through layers of lies all around them.

Understanding why Vonnegut is not Billy Pilgrim is essential, because the question is still raised as to why he would make the protagonist go through much of the same thing he did, if at the same time distances himself as far as he can? Probably a way of coping with his memories without actually coping with his memories. Yet another paradoxical question in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

One of the more obvious postmodernist qualities is how Vonnegut plays with the idea of his actual authorial presence in the text. Since he appears several times throughout the novel, and his presence must not just be some form of a strange red herring misleading the audience, there has to be a reason behind it as to why he did it. And we do not even have to go far to point out this technique, since as early as the first chapter we get to meet the narrator, later identified as Vonnegut, as he narrates the first chapter in a metafictional way while talking about the inspirations, obstacles and experiences behind writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. More so, as the whole of the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is basically “just” the ramblings of the narrator about how he wanted to write a book about

Dresden, especially seeing how he thought it would be an easy task for him, “since all [he] would have to do would be to report what [he]I had seen” and would also “that it would be a masterpiece or at least make [him] a lot of money, since the subject was so big.” (9)

A couple of chapters into the book the narrator even goes as far as to point his presence out, when, for example in the fifth chapter, in the scene where Billy sees a group of American people with their trousers pulled down, urinating and defecating, the narration takes an unexpected turn into the alley of postmodernist storytelling.

“Billy looked inside the latrine. The wailing was coming from in there. The place was crammed with Americans who had taken their pants down. The welcome feast had made them as sick as volcanoes. The buckets were full or had been kicked over.” (161)

Later in this scene, one of the Americans begin to lament about how he “had excreted all there was except for his brains.” (161) It turns out that American man was Vonnegut himself, as the narrator (who at this point I think we can agree is no doubt to be anyone else other than Vonnegut himself) points this out in an explicit, yet appropriately done way, with these most obvious, straightforward lines: “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book”. (169) And of course, if still in doubt, all you have to do to seal the deal on who the author was is to check the cover of the book you are reading.

Now, I cannot really think that there would be a better way to emphasize the realness and hands-on-ness of any personal experience (other than going all-out and writing an autobiography, probably) than to include yourself in the narrative, then first fictionalize the events, and then go and take turns just to point it out to the reader that yes, it was you, the author who actually experienced all the things that the narrator experienced, and you as a reader have to know it, even if it meant breaking the fourth wall in the narration. And at this point into the analysis, it may not be absolutely necessary to point out, but I still find it important to emphasize how this is a brilliant way of extracting yet another postmodernist aspect in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: self-reflexivity.

Writing teachers often advise not to make it obvious that one is reading a work of fiction, and that a book's prose should be as “transparent” as possible. While *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s prose is everything except flowery and purple, it is undeniably surprising to once again read about the narrator narrating how he physically and literally appears in the story. The horror film *Scream* (1996) use a similar approach, where in one of the scenes the characters start discussing what makes up the structure of a horror film,

and what other place would they find for this delightful pastime, than that exact horror film they exist in (Felluga).

But of course self-reflexivity can come in many ways, one of the more obvious ones being pointing out that the one character easing himself along with other soldiers is no other than the author and narrator of the book the lovely reader is holding in his hands. The simple idea of merging reality with fiction, or rather the all-out fictionalization of reality is a powerful way in your narrative for conveying an artistic expression, or even a moral to take away in the end, but this method gives it a kick with its innovative juices, yet somehow also keeping it traditional and intelligible. Just take a look at Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). Actually, take a look at any of Hemingway's novels, then compare them to his autobiography. Turns out they are essentially the same thing. Especially *A Moveable Feast* (1964), but that was not intended to be published anyway to tell the truth. Nonetheless, the same approach was taken in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) as well. The emphasis is not so much on showcasing traditional books that were written semi-autobiographically, but to point out that neither of them explicitly break the fourth wall. This aspect is one that very much separates *Slaughterhouse-Five* as being postmodern from the other narratives I have mentioned.

When looking for postmodernist aspects in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and putting aside the overarching themes and tropes that require a more thorough viewing of the text, I have found a particular scene that in itself fulfills one of the “requirements” seen in the Dino Felluga essay: irony and parody. The scene in question is the one in which Billy Pilgrim watches a war movie, but as a twist and because he once again becomes unstuck in time, watches it played forwards and then backwards. The scene then goes:

“American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.” (99)

I would not necessarily call this scene parody in the sense that it is intended to be funny, although there is an underlying theme of humor seeing such war events actually

doing good to someone. This backwards movie falls much more into the category of irony – but nonetheless can be considered a war parody – because of what I described: an unconventional presentation of war assets, meaning the exact opposite of what they are supposed to do. The scene then continues:

“The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.” (99)

Since everyone knows this is not what happened in real life, we once again get a sense of irony. Felluga also points out that many works of the postmodernist movement approach their ideas with a playful manner. And what is more playful than taking weapons, vehicles and images that are connected to death, destruction and obliteration, and turn them into something that actually alleviate the things that they are supposed to do; or rather completely undo what they did in the forwards version of the same film.

As seen earlier in this thesis, one of the postmodernism's approaches in storytelling is to jump from one place to another and to give fragments of information that in the end may or may not make up the whole picture (Felluga). So fragmentation is arguably something that could help something be defined as postmodernist; but of course only if it is found among a pile of other qualities, since fragmentation is often pointed out as a defining characteristic in romanticism and romantic art for example. But one of the more interesting and science fiction based ways in which Vonnegut has created this fragmented approach *Slaughterhouse-Five* – whether intentionally or not – was to remove the constraints of the fourth dimension from Billy – the Tralfamadorian time perception – and thus free him from the seat belts of time, and to have him stuck not in time, but become unstuck in time. From science fiction's viewpoint, this is some good old time travelling,

the trope that never seems to get old (Jacobs). From postmodernism's point of view though, it's a brilliant way to include fragmented narration into a story. In contrast to the previous postmodernist quality we looked at – self-reflexivity –, this fragmentation is woven into the story as an actual narrative tool that could make people point and say “yes, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is science fiction;” a point that I would like to come back to later in the thesis. There are a few possibilities as to why this fragmented narrative was written for Billy Pilgrim's adventures, and the one I personally agree with is how this is actually Vonnegut again, trying to come in terms with all the horrific experiences he had in World War II. After all, almost everything that Billy goes through is either a war event, or something with an extraordinary importance in his life, like intercourse with his wife whom he does not really love, or being showcased in the Tralfamadorian zoo bare naked. Being unstuck in time is just a layer of glossy science fiction paint glazed over the fact that Vonnegut is becoming a salt pillar during his looking back through Billy's eyes. But in the process we realize that Vonnegut cannot think of the weirdness that was World War II, and the questions that arise from Dresden for example.

Of course, standing bare naked like an animal ready to be thrown food at, being put in the Tralfamadorian zoo, Billy cannot resist asking the most obvious question, that anyone else would given the same situation: “Why me?” To this, the Tralfamadorians throw a curve ball, and simply reply: “That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?” (101) All the memories of World War II, Dresden and everything that happened along the way are there in Vonnegut's memories, locked deeply inside his brain, like the above-mentioned bugs trapped in amber, and this also is exactly what the Tralfamadorians say: “Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why.” (102) Vonnegut seems to suggest that even if he cannot help thinking about the past and will never be able to change what has been done, and knows he should not do it, it simply just happens. Just as Billy Pilgrim has no say when or why he travels through time. And it is this “why” that is the genius of the question: there simply is no why. Things either are or are not. To me, this scene represents one of the biggest strengths of the book: we tend to think that life is like a linear sequence of choices, with each one leading to somewhere for a reason. We like to believe we have control, that we are the ones writing our own narratives. But in asking why we chose to do

something in the past, we end up asking the same question Billy did in the Tralfamadorian zoo. Maybe choice itself is an illusion, and having a say in our lives is not in our control as much as we would like to admit to ourselves.

But what is even more interesting is how a reader – while at the same time being engaged in Billy Pilgrim's always strange and weird adventures – finds himself unintentionally and wholly unaware, becomes unstuck in time. Just as how Billy Pilgrim experiences everything virtually all at once, in a series of seemingly random order, the reader as well gets the same perception while being introduced to each new episode of time travel. The emphasis then shifts from the mere perception of a tragic death to something else: the unescapable nature of real-world events, and how the permanent and eternal linear sequence of changes in the universe and each individual's life that we perceive as time passing is just an illusion, and that there is not, there was not and there will not be any other way. Being unstuck in time just reinforces the significance of Billy Pilgrim asking the “Why me?” question (Merrill). I think my reading of the scene is further emphasized by the single paragraph, that is one sentence: “Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future.” (82)

3.3. Aspects of science fiction

Of course we have to talk about Tralfamadore as a science fiction point as well. First off, everyone loves a good alien story, should it be the lovely story of *E.T. (1982)* from Steven Spielberg, or the terrifying horror that is Ridley Scott's *Alien (1979)*. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not the first book in which Tralfamadore makes an appearance, in fact, it had already made an appearance in the 1959 Vonnegut book *The Sirens of Titan*. These weird creatures are unlike most alien characters in any science fiction book, since they are, according to Billy Pilgrim ”two feet high, and green., and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm.” (38) Why Vonnegut designed such a creature is a mystery to me, although it may have to do something with how they perceive time: with a single eye that senses all of it and a hand that holds the power to grasp it all at once.

This particular time perception is even mentioned in one of Billy Pilgrim's letters:

“The creatures were friendly, and they could see in four dimensions. They pitied Earthlings for being able to see only three. They had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time. Billy promised to tell what some of those wonderful things were in his next letter.” (38)

He then goes on to write:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "so it goes." (38)

I think it is safe to say that this scene showcases yet again how Vonnegut is trying to come to terms with all the dead civilians and soldiers who died either during the Dresden firebombing or any other time in World War II for that matter. Maybe he wishes he himself could just shrug and write it off with a “so it goes.” It would not turn him into a pillar of salt at least.

But back to the science fiction aspects of Tralfamadore, we cannot glide over the fact that they perceive time all at once, and in four dimensions for that matter. First, Vonnegut was not the first writer to include the concept of time as the fourth dimension. In fact, by the time the book was published, it was a widely accepted concept of the scientific community that the three spacial dimensions and time are linked into what is called “spacetime”, a concept that works somewhat close to how it is described in the book. Basically, the concept of four dimensions means that in order to find something in

spacetime, you first of all have to tell where it is in space, and when it takes place in time (“What Is Space-time?”). The same concept is used in the British television show *Doctor Who* as well, since in the series, the Doctor travels with the help of his “time machine” called the TARDIS, a machine disguised as a blue police box that is bigger on the inside than the outside, and can travel to virtually anywhere in the whole of space and time (“The TARDIS”). The reason why I included this comparison in my thesis is because of the undeniable science fiction trope that is the Tralfamadorian time perception. And since it was linked with the postmodernist approach of fragmented storytelling, it is that much more important as to what makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* a great book in both senses.

Of course, Billy Pilgrim being unstuck in time, he actually does travel through time. A narrative tool that yet again, is not really that far from being an actual scientific concept. Virtually all of physics accept Einstein's theory of relativity. But since I do not by any means want to suggest that I am someone who understands it, I definitely know, that according to this theory, time travel is actually possible. According to the rules of Einstein's theory of relativity, the only constant in the universe is the speed of light. Although nothing has achieved this so far – at least according to not-so recent studies –, there is a possibility that once that limit is broken, an object travelling at given speed will actually find itself travelling backwards in time (Fuller). So while it may not be the same way Billy Pilgrim experienced it – and to be frank, there is no evidence as of this time that it could have happened or that it could happen in the near future –, but it is really fascinating to see that according to the laws of physics and according to Einstein's theory of relativity time travel is indeed possible.

A surprising thing to note here is how this concept has actually preceded Einstein. And interestingly enough, it was done so in a 19th century science fiction novella of all things. I have talked about H.G. Wells as one of the people who can be credited for helping in establishing science fiction as a genre – and steampunk, for that matter, which is a peculiar subgenre of science fiction that is set mostly in the Victorian era, with inventions and concepts that usually involve inventions loyal to the period and technology available. Although to be even more precise, H.G. Wells is usually credited along with Jules Verne – whom we have again talked about already – as the two great writers that eventually influenced the creation of steampunk (“What Is Steampunk?”).

But back to H.G. Wells and him preceding Einstein, his novella *The Time Machine*

was published in 1895, ten years before Einstein published his famous essay “*On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies*” (1905), the paper that basically introduced the foundations of the theory of special relativity. I have not yet heard of any evidence that somehow connects the two things together or suggest that Einstein was influenced by H.G. Wells' novella, but nonetheless it shows that the time travel aspects of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* are indeed concepts that are loyal to the roots of science fiction writing. And what is even more interesting is how Vonnegut has managed to renew the arguably tired old cliché that time travel has unfortunately become, and merge it with the reality of war memories floating up in random moments. Vonnegut has managed to evolve time travel into something more than just an interesting science fiction concept, and give it a twist that has so many levels of literary importance, be it the inclusion of postmodernist fragmentation or the straightforward science fiction storytelling.

4. CONCLUSION AND CLOSURE

A lot of development in creative processes and art evolution took place along the time span of more than a century. That is, if we view the progress of science fiction from the publishing of *Frankenstein* in 1818 up to *Slaughterhouse-Five's* appearance in the literary space. It is no doubt a large chunk of time, and it is difficult to account for all the things that helped in developing the techniques and approaches that lead to the appearance of novels and writers whom helped to achieve everything that was required in order to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The abandonment of Victorian writing techniques and literary genres, the turn of the 19th century and the new perspectives that the 20th century brought were all revolutionary enough for new writers to appear. With Woolfe's and Joyce's developments of modernist writing, the path was set up for even more radical ideas to appear, that later evolved and developed into postmodernism. The avantgarde has paved the way for techniques that later were employed by these new writers, such as the self-reflexive nature of artists like Picasso, the fragmented writing methods of poets like T.S. Eliot, rejection of traditional storytelling methods and techniques developed by Woolfe's stream of consciousness narrative style and the parodical and ironic nature of storytelling found in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Felluga). All of these were radical changes in their respective periods of time, but nonetheless, postmodernists took these approaches even further.

In my thesis, I tried to include the most important aspects in which Vonnegut has managed to blend the genres of science fiction literature and war fiction and in turn has managed to create not only a great work in their respective categories, but one that is often cited among examples of postmodernist fiction. The blame that science fiction is a genre for nerds and pulp-loving man-children has been withdrawn and disproven, and Vonnegut has no doubt helped in this process with writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But because *Slaughterhouse-Five* is so much more than just a creatively spiced-up work of science fiction literature that somehow happened to hit the right notes in its respective literary aspects, I felt it was a book deserving of an analysis as to why is it so important in the developments of the science fiction genre, and why it can be seen as a benchmark in “readable” postmodernist writing.

Kurt Vonnegut might be a writer not so much appreciated in Hungarian literary circles concerned with education – as I am yet to meet a Hungarian literature course book

that even mentions him, not to mention talk about him as someone who should be seen as an important postmodernist or science fiction writer –, but of course there is always room for improvement in any literature class. But what we can undoubtedly take away from *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that postmodernist writing can be fun, and that science fiction is still – and always was – a genre that is more than just shooting up insane space aliens from a distant planet called Nibiru.

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