

The Narrative Function of Kilgore Trout and His Fictional Works in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Vonnegut's use of historical and imaginary sources in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, paying particular attention to the structural role played by Kilgore Trout—Vonnegut's literary alter ego—and his six science-fiction stories. Trout's intratextual fiction, it is argued here, enlarges the scope of the novel, underlines a series of central themes, criticizes certain moral values, and introduces a comic dimension that counterbalances the seriousness of the war material.

With his characteristic critical insight, Tony Tanner defines *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's sixth novel, as "a moving meditation on the relationship between history and dreaming cast in an appropriately factual/fiction mode" (195). The result is, as the inner title-page of the book proclaims, "a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales," in which the author fictionalizes history while "factualizing" what is fictional, by means of the "formal linking of history and fiction through the common denominators of intertextuality and narrativity" (Hutcheon 11). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* this dialectic and interdiscursive process, which Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction," is basically established through the substantial incorporation of quotes from various historical and fictional sources.¹

Although it should not be forgotten that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is first and foremost a work of fiction, Vonnegut introduces numerous documentary extracts from books on the Second World War and, in particular, on the destruction of Dresden (*Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery* by Mary Endell, *The Destruction of Dresden* by David Irving, etc.). These intertextualizations lend historical realism and verisimilitude to this "lousy little book" (2), while reminding the reader of the real basis which inspired it: the bombing of Dresden, which was witnessed by the author on 13 February 1945. In addition, these documentary sources fulfill three specific aims at the thematic level: they emphasize the

terrible effects of violence, draw historical parallelisms with other examples of destruction and point to the historically cyclical nature of human cruelty.

The fictional sources, in contrast, reinforce the imaginary scope of the novel, "highlighting our need for fantasy in the cruel and absurd world depicted in the historical quotes" (Loeb 95). However, the quotes, references and extracts in this particular category can be subjected to internal subdivision. On the one hand, *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains numerous direct or indirect allusions to works by such authors as Horace, Crane, Céline, Dostoyevski and Theodore Roethke, which from a different thematic perspective illustrate and expand upon some of the basic questions dealt with in the novel: time, death, free will, etc. But together with these fictional-literary sources, Vonnegut also introduces a series of textual references to strictly imaginary works, that is to say those invented by the author and quoted by him as if they were actual published sources.² Within this latter group—the main object of our attention in this paper—particular importance is attached to the intertextualization of six science-fiction stories, the author of which is none other than the charismatic Kilgore Trout. But before we go on to analyze the important role of this fictitious work of his within the novel, some preliminary considerations regarding this character would seem to be in order.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Trout still has more or less the same physical appearance as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), in which he made his literary debut: he has "a full beard" and the look of "a cracked messiah", not unlike a "prisoner of war" (167). However, his personality has become more pessimistic and embittered. Trout's frustration is due to the fact that he has spent his whole life "opening the window and making love to the world" (169), and yet proved unable to change anything. The only apparent result is that he now feels "friendless and despised" (111). This sensation of impotence turns Trout into an ironic character, as is made evident in a dialogue between him and Maggie White in the course of a party. Here, Trout takes advantage of Maggie's ingenuousness to comment that everything he writes about is real, since "If I wrote something that hadn't really happened, and tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That's fraud" (171). These words appear even more ironic if it is borne in mind that "most of Trout's novels, after all, dealt with time warps and extrasensory perception and other unexpected things" (175).

As a science-fiction writer Trout is unknown to the critics, since his books only serve as "window dressing" in porn-shops. Eliot Rosewater, who reappears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is "the only person who ever heard of him" (110). This character, though a fervent admirer of his novels, admits that "Kilgore Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good" (110). Trout himself goes even further when he states that "He did not think of himself as a writer for the simple reason that the world had never allowed him to think of himself in this way" (169).

Both on a personal and on a literary level, Kilgore Trout's career bears a striking resemblance to that of Kurt Vonnegut. Before the author achieved success with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he had to earn a living in public relations, a profession similar to Trout's in the novel, since the latter is "a circulation man for the *Ilium Gazette* (166). For a number of years Vonnegut also had to write short stories for "slick magazines" in order to survive financially. In fact, even *Playboy* published an interview with the author in 1973 (Vonnegut *WFG* 213-255). Moreover, when Vonnegut first began

to publish his novels, they appeared in cheap paperback editions, and he was immediately classified as an author of science-fiction. The parallelism between Trout and Vonnegut is also reflected in the fact that both write novels of ideas, and use the genre of science-fiction as a vehicle for transmitting critical commentaries on the values of American society and, by extension, on the human condition. As was the case in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, then, the presence of Trout in *Slaughterhouse-Five* indicates Vonnegut's preoccupation with the role of the author in society. As he himself explains: "I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to *how* writers should serve. Mainly I think they should be—and biologically have to be—agents of change. For the better, we hope" (WFG 213). All these parallelisms enable Kilgore Trout to be clearly identified as a personal and literary projection of the author. Significantly, again, this identification is strengthened by the fact—surely no coincidence—that the names of Kurt Vonnegut and Kilgore Trout contain the same number of letters and that "the first and the last two letters are the same in both names" (Loeb 51).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Eliot Rosewater is Billy's room-mate in a psychiatric hospital for veterans, where both are recovering from the terrible impact of the war. Eliot, as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, "had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier" and Billy, for his part, "had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden" (101). As a result of all this, "they had both found life meaningless" (101). In an attempt to give some meaning to their lives, the two characters seek in science-fiction the means "to re-invent themselves and their universe" (101). In this context, Kilgore Trout's fiction offers them "wonderful new lies" "to go on living" (101). But just as he did in *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Vonnegut also points to the inherent danger that lies in allowing oneself to be taken in by "harmless untruths."

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* we are told that Billy Pilgrim has read "dozens of books by Trout." Yet in the novel there are only explicit references to six of his works: *The Big Board*, *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, *The Gutless Wonder*, *The Gospel from Outer Space*, "Jesus and the Time Machine" and "The Money Tree."

The Big Board tells the story of two human beings who are kidnapped by extraterrestrials in order to be exhibited in a zoo on the planet Zircon-212. The extraterrestrials equip the earth-dwellers with a stockmarket operations board, an electronic indicator of market prices and a telephone, supposedly linked up to a stockbroker on Earth. In addition, they claim to have invested a million dollars in the stock-market on behalf of the kidnapped couple; however, they also warned them that it was up to them "to manage it so that they would be fabulously wealthy when they were returned to Earth" (201). It all turns out to be a setup on the part of the extraterrestrials "to make them jump up and down and cheer, or gloat, or sulk, or tear their hair, to be scared shitless or to feel as contented as babies in their mother's arms" (202).

The Big Board fulfills at least three functions in the context of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Firstly, it provides Billy Pilgrim with the imaginary material necessary for his Tralfamadorian experience. In fact, the plot of this novel corresponds perfectly to what happens to the main character in all respects except for the name of the planet. This textual duplication, based on the metafictional technique of the "mise en abîme" and through

which one level of narration is reflected in another, different one, allows Vonnegut to stress the mutual "contamination" of fantasy and reality. Secondly, Trout's novel serves to present a world in which even the sole purpose that seems to exist in life proves to be false. Thus, the same lack of meaning that can be detected in the life of this couple is extended to Billy's existence, for he too will be kidnapped, caged and manipulated by the Tralfamadorians simply in order that he may "perform vividly for the crowds at the zoo" (201). This idea suggests that man is no more than a poor, ridiculous fairground animal doing its tricks in the grotesque "funfair" of life. A third and final thematic aspect which can be detected in *The Big Board* is the excessive importance human beings attach to money; something particularly absurd considering that the couple are deprived of their freedom.

The blind attraction man feels for personal enrichment, and the tragic consequences money may bring, are parodied in another story by Trout titled "The Money Tree." Here we read of a tree with twenty-dollar bills instead of leaves, treasury bonds in place of flowers and diamonds for fruit. This story presents a modern view of the Biblical episode of the Tree of Good and Evil, in which Trout identifies the "earthly paradise" with economic abundance and the power that money brings. Reflecting the fate of the original Biblical couple, modern man will be tempted by the "devil" (represented in his case by the capitalist system) and will be forced to pay a high price. However, "The Money Tree" differs significantly from the Biblical model, since in the modern version it is man who inflicts an exemplary punishment upon himself. Indeed, in their mad, unbridled desire to gain possession of the riches sprouting from this peculiar tree, "human beings . . . killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer" (167).

In *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* Trout puts forward the theory that mental illnesses can only be cured in the fourth dimension; hence "three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them" (104). The context in which this novel by Trout appears is most appropriate, since we are given a summary of the plot precisely when Eliot and Billy are interned in a psychiatric hospital. This novel also exercises considerable psychological influence on the main character, since Billy uses it to develop his idea that the Tralfamadorians live and communicate with each other telepathically in the fourth dimension. *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* is a comic demonstration of the limitations of human knowledge. Yet it also raises a dramatic question. As María Dolores Herrero Granados suggests, this novel reflects the sickly state of society and, what is worse, shows that "la cura está fuera de nuestro alcance" and that "nada podemos hacer para solventar el problema" (92).

The Gutless Wonder can be seen as a criticism of the dehumanization brought on by war. This novel (perhaps in allusion to Harry Truman) is about a robot with a human appearance that drops incendiary bombs on people from the air. Since the robot is not aware of what he is doing, he feels no sense of guilt either. The ironic thing about the case is that "nobody held it against him that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgiveable" (168). When the robot finally manages to solve his bad breath problem, people accept him once again and he wins great popularity. This story of Trout's can be seen as a criticism of what Marvin Austin calls the "John Wayne Syndrome": "that is, the idea that there is something glorious and manly about fighting in

wars and killing the enemy” (184). The only result of this bellicose attitude is laconically expressed by Vonnegut in the last chapter of the novel: “every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes” (210). By means of this summary of Trout’s, Vonnegut criticizes not only this dehumanized policy that converts man into a “killing machine,” but also the way American society accepts the cruelty of war as something natural. In this, Monica Loeb sees a clear parallelism between the plot of *The Gutless Wonder* and Robert Pilgrim’s development as a character. Indeed, the behavior of Billy’s son is unacceptable to society when, as a boy, he devotes his energies to smashing tombstones. Ironically, when he becomes a “Green Beret” and kills hundreds of Vietnamese, society comprehends his behavior as something logical and reasonable. According to Loeb, this emphasis on outward appearances stresses Vonnegut’s critical stance with regard to the hypocrisy and “hollowness of middle-class values” (63).

The Gospel from Outer Space is about “a visitor from outer space, shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian,” who decides to study Christianity in order to discover “why Christians found it so easy to be cruel” (108). The conclusion he reaches is that the Gospel has been misinterpreted. In the opinion of this alien, more importance has been given to the fact that Christ was “the Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe” and therefore “well connected,” than to the real message of love and compassion that he preached. According to this extraterrestrial, the implicit message Christians see in the Gospel is: “*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected*” (109). With the idea of rescuing Christianity from this error, the visitor from outer space writes a new gospel. The only modification to the original text is that Christ appears as a “nobody,” with no “influence” of any kind in the Kingdom of Heaven. However, after his crucifixion, God the Father decides to accept him as his legitimate son and “to punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections” (110).

The Gospel from Outer Space enables Billy to be associated with the Biblical Christ and with Trout’s model. As Marvin Austin observes:

Billy is like Christ in his innocence and his suffering. However, as a person, Billy is much more like the “nobody” Christ depicted in Trout’s novel than the one described in the Bible. Billy, the “Sad Sack” soldier, is clearly a “nobody” without any connections whatsoever. The effect of this comparison is to create a kind of Billy Pilgrim-Everyman (or “nobody”)-Christ relationship. (190)

This parallelism pursues a double objective. On the one hand, it points to the semi-divine character of Billy and all those who are innocent victims of human cruelty. On this level, the identification of Billy with the figure of Christ would have a didactic purpose aimed at correcting all the humiliations suffered by the “nobodies” of the world. On the other hand, it has to be made clear that the correspondence between Billy and Christ is not absolute, because “Unlike Christ, of course, Billy has no purpose and is totally ignorant of the role he plays” (Austin 191). It can thus be concluded that in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, too, Billy functions as a parody of the figure of Christ, more specifically as an example not to be followed. Through this discrepancy Vonnegut emphasizes the “divine” and apathetic character of this schizophrenic protagonist.

“Jesus and the Time Machine” tells the story of a time-traveller who returned to the past to find out “whether or not Jesus had really died on the cross, or whether he had been taken down while still alive, whether he had really gone on living” (203). With the help of a stethoscope, the traveller establishes that after crucifixion “The Son of God was dead as a doornail” and that “Jesus was five feet and three and a half inches long” (203). The use of the adjective “long” (suggesting horizontality), instead of the expected “tall” (verticality), adds visual confirmation to the certainty of his death. As can be seen, in this story as well as in *The Gospel from Outer Space*, Vonnegut undermines the traditional conception of Christianity by placing the emphasis on the human character of Christ instead of on his divinity. The purpose seems obvious. If Christ is a “nobody,” an insignificant mortal of “five feet and three and a half inches” and a victim of circumstances, his message consequently becomes more human and people can identify more easily with him. As Vonnegut explains in *Palm Sunday*: “If he were the Son of our God, he would not need us. It is because he is a common human being exactly like us that we are here—doing, as common people must, what little we can” (218).

As has been seen above, the stories of Kilgore Trout fulfill various important functions within the novel. For one thing, they serve as humorous counterpoint to the main action. In this respect, their function is similar to that of dramatic comic relief. Vonnegut himself confirms this idea when he observes in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (1974) that “the science-fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clowns in Shakespeare” (235). In addition, Trout’s fiction gives the novel thematic unity. Thus, for example, among other objectives, *The Big Board* and *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* provide the main character with the necessary material for his Tralfamadorian experience. Trout’s novels also underline and substantially enlarge upon a series of central themes. In “The Money Tree” great play is made of the dehumanization brought about by the capitalist system, in stirring up the most extreme form of avarice in the heart of man. The thematic interest of *The Gutless Wonder* is centered on another type of dehumanization: the inconceivable acceptance of war as a social phenomenon that ennobles man. Finally, in *The Gospel from Outer Space* and “Jesus and the Time Machine” emphasis is placed on a reinterpretation of the Gospel and the figure of Christ, with the aim of stressing the terrible need for love and compassion in the world.

Science-fiction, as a fictional “lie,” can be a splendid vehicle for distancing ourselves from day-to-day reality and giving us greater critical objectivity (as the novels of Trout do). However, science-fiction can also be destructive if we cling to it as the only way of understanding the world and as an excuse to ignore the needs of our fellow human beings. As Malcolm Bradbury observes:

Las ‘ficciones inocuas’ pueden quizá liberarnos de este mundo sombrío, pero también pueden generar sus propios medios de esclavitud: como Billy es al mismo tiempo prisionero en Tralfamador y en Dresde, así los personajes —‘juguetes indiferentes’— son víctimas de la imaginación del autor. (305)

For Vonnegut, reality is full of wars, suffering and incongruities, but it is not a question of closing one’s eyes to this panorama, as Billy does, and simply saying “So it goes.” On

the contrary, it is a matter of keeping one's eyes wide open, facing reality as it is and attempting to help each other with the best possible will. In this respect, Trout's novels function as parables or metaphors attempting to correct our vision of the world. During the party held to celebrate Billy's wedding anniversary, we are told that "Everybody at the party was associated with optometry in some way, except Trout. And he alone was without glasses" (170). Paradoxically, although Billy is a renowned oculist, he is too "short-sighted" to see the ethical significance of Trout's novels. From this viewpoint, the function of Trout and his fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is similar that of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Trout is still the prophetic voice speaking through the mouth of the author, transmitting to us the urgent need to combat human cruelty with compassion and solidarity: a message which Billy unfortunately never manages to grasp.

Notes

1. The inclusion of, or allusion to, external sources cannot be considered a new resource, or one exclusive to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In fact, in his first five novels Vonnegut introduces songs, poems, letters, "calypsos" and references to books and authors both real and fictitious. What is indubitably true is that in *Slaughterhouse-Five* a quantitative and qualitative change can be observed with regard to the use of quoted sources. This is confirmed by the appearance of a large number of quotes, some thirty of them, and the important function they fulfill within the structure of the novel.

2. This technique, which Jaime Alazraki terms "transposición por condensación," consists of "transformar un texto a través de un resumen que, como todo resumen, condensa el original" (444). This procedure is typical of Borges, who explains in the preface to his *Ficciones*: "Desvarío laborioso y empobrecedor el de componer vastos libros; el de explayar en quinientas páginas una idea cuya perfecta exposición oral cabe en pocos minutos. Mejor procedimiento es simular que esos libros ya existen y ofrecer un resumen, un comentario" (12).

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