
**BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES OF FACT AND FICTION: A POSTMODERN APPROACH
A STUDY OF JOSEPH HELLER'S CATCH-22 AND KURT VONNEGUT'S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-
FIVE**

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Abstract: This paper aims to look at the chaotic chronological sequencing in time and events as well as the discontinuous language employed in the select novels that give way to a distorted reality. Time as a reflection of a one-time reality is a strange concept in a postmodern setting that qualifies absurdism. Language as a construct is ruptured and it leads to multiple interpretations. Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, labelled as postmodern writers, have conveniently manipulated these aspects to warp reality and speak for the formlessness of the novels. Even though the novels are characterized by the confusing and bizarre chronological order and narrative, there is yet a structuring in focus as well as the surfacing the reality it wants to convey. A cyclical or illogical narrative is not a new concept, but the erratic and random movement of the narratives through time and space is a postmodern contribution.

Keywords: discontinuous narrative, distorted time-shifts, fact and fiction, postmodernism

The word 'post-modernism' does not typify fixed characteristics or traits, but do vary according to different usages. It is used not only to refer just to art and culture, but also more comprehensively to a wide range of aspects of the modern society. The post in post modernism signifies a trend or a temporal condition i.e. a period after modernism as well as it signifies a resistance against modernism and a break from its fixed conventions. Thus post modernism is a late modernism as well as anti- modernism. This new sensibility evoked by postmodernism can be traced even in literature of the period with more weightage given to the genre of fiction of that period. A brief study of the postmodern techniques that has found its way into contemporary literature will be helpful to understand the select authors as well as their works that give suggestive observations to claim it as 'postmodern'. Postmodernism is characterized by a more welcoming, celebrating attitude towards the modern world, with the exhaustion of the Modernist project. It reflects a world of uncertainty with the resultant senses of fragmentation, of discontinuity and reality as a 'construct'.

The techniques employed in most of the postmodern novels characterize confusion. The following are some of the techniques seen in various novels.

•**Contradiction and Permutation:** The narrative techniques in the postmodern novel open up a wide range of possibilities as various interpretations.

•**Discontinuity:** This is an inevitable feature in Postmodern Fiction and the various devices used for discontinuity are blank spaces, linguistic inventiveness in the form of capitalized headings, typographical devices and child prattle narration. Through discontinuity, the writers are able to express truth and experiences in a random manner.

•**Excess:** Postmodern fiction abounds details in the novels very intricately and this leads to the readers

being crushed under a multiplicity of details.

•**Time Shifts:** Postmodern writers do not allow lazy reading among the readers; instead they are always transported from one place to another that intends to keep the mind attentive.

•**Randomness:** This technique aims at the random narration of the novel that can be read in any manner possible even by shuffling the pages of the novel in order to give rise to many interpretations. B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* characterizes randomness to the highest extreme.

•**Short Circuit:** As a result of this technique imposed on the readers, they will experience a shock and allowing them to come out of the conventional category of reading. A popular device used for this effect is the mingling of fact and fiction in the novels. While these challenges demand extended thinking, the understanding of the readers is manipulated by further postmodern strategies. This extended thinking gives rise to unanswerable question, i.e., where does 'fiction' end and 'reality' begin? Postmodern writers weave the real and the seeming real intricately into the plot and sufficiently infect the readers with an unconventional style of language usage. Thus blending the fictitious and the factual into a labyrinthine and difficult plot is considered as one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. This paper will analyse this hallmark in a descriptive manner incorporating factors like time, space, and the language employed in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To read a postmodern novel is to be surprised and frequently to be overwhelmed; it is to have expectations thwarted and strategies of interpretation anticipated, attacked, parodied or simply taken on as topics of discussion within the fiction...postmodern novels tend to initiate the agonistic struggle with their implied audiences, inviting tactics that will lead to narrative impasses

and cognitive confusion.(Elliott 1991: 693) The notable novelists who have exemplified the postmodernist mood or style in their works are John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., John Fowles, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Heller etc. Outside the English speaking world, the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges and the later works of Italo Calvino show similar postmodern tendencies. The select authors for this study i.e., Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut came to prominence with the publication of the select works, *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* respectively. Joseph Heller has been called a black humorist and a postmodern writer while Kurt Vonnegut has been categorized as science fiction writer, satirist, black humorist as well as a postmodern writer. Time and Reality The contemporary writer...is forced to start from scratch: Reality does not exist, time does not exist, and personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died, now no one knows the plot and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive and there is no density, only chance. (Kuehl 1989: 41) What is the significance of reality in terms of the time factor? Does one count on reality only in terms of the present situation? To what extent does the past and the future hold good to comprehend reality? Human beings have been trained or disciplined to perceive something as real only that has taken a form in the present. But literature has taken the license to portray human beings as deceiving reality, taking into consideration cross shifts in the time frame. A postmodern writer can employ a free play of words, structures as well as characters since it justifies the most interesting tenet of postmodernism i.e. absurdism or irrationality. Within a postmodern setting, time does not restrict the human subject and the mind to one particular event or instance. There is a constant movement in the subject's mind that is retrospective as well as prospective, while not ignoring the present time too. Therefore time does not portray a onetime reality, but it moves back and forth, thereby warping reality and this conforms to the illogical and absurd world projected in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The concept of time in these novels work against the conventional concept of time and its orderly aspects, i.e. past, present and the future. Joseph Heller has conveniently projected a drastic time shift, where Yossarian, the protagonist follows an illogical ordering of events in his mind. This calls for a loose structuring of the plot of events and it also serves as a testimony to the complexity of imagination penned down on paper. Kurt Vonnegut has ingeniously

incorporated chaotic time shifts or leaps that distort reality to a great extent. The different worlds portrayed in the novel vividly shows the past, present and also the future as it is foreseen by Billy Pilgrim which is a result of his time travels. These confusing realities again defy the onetime reality and thereby qualifying it with a fictional factor. Heller has juxtaposed events to a great extent, employing lots of repetitions and flashback techniques. The novel opens with Yossarian at the hospital, spending his time censoring letters projecting a very casual atmosphere. But the events ahead that are described in the novel have already taken place, i.e. the major flying missions already been flown to the death of Snowden as well as the other characters who have played a vital role in Yossarian's life. Even though the writing portrays something that has happened, it is tremendously blurred with repetitions making the understanding chaotic and not sensible to the rational mind. The most important and recurring event among the various repetitions is the description of Snowden's death to which Yossarian was an eye-witness. The fictional status of the novel does not override any reality. In fact Snowden's death reflects the reality or the absurdism of life. This revelation of the futility of human existence urges Yossarian to show impudence and shakes off his military responsibility. He wants to live his own life and not for the sake of anything or anyone and thus escapes off to Sweden like Orr who ran away from the war without anyone's knowledge. In the view of shaking off his military responsibility, Yossarian does not wear his uniform. He finds in his attire a 'bloody' torture since Snowden's blood had covered his whole uniform. Therefore the secret of the reality of death and the absurdity of human life as well as war are emphasized deftly by Heller through these obscure and chaotic time shift techniques. As a matter of the dislocation of the time and space dimension by Joseph Heller, the narrative moves back and forth in a very random manner and the events are carelessly thrown on the paper in the form of words. This suits well to Heller's own idea of the novel being 'recurring and cyclical'. While Heller's *Catch-22* takes in a time shift between the past and the present, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* progresses with its temporal dimension deeply dislocated, shifting in and out between the past, present and the future. Vonnegut himself describes the novel as "somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet of Tralfamadore where the flying saucers come from peace" in the title page. Here the reference to Tralfamadore is the instrument of Vonnegut's description of Billy Pilgrim's slip into time or as told by the author himself that Billy Pilgrim has come 'unstuck in time', which means that

Billy is free from the binding concept of time.

A critical viewpoint of the novel goes on like this: Slaughterhouse-Five thus gains its structure from Vonnegut's essential aesthetic problem- how to describe a reality that is beyond human imagination. (Marvin 2002:71) Every now and then Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist gets 'unstuck in time', where the present moments predominantly gives way to the recollections of the past or he moves way ahead of himself to the unexpected future life. With the evocation of such timelessness, the structure of the novel too tends to be haphazard and the narrative is broken into little narratives in the form of short sentences. These short sentences indirectly reflect the reality projected in the novel, i.e. the absurdity or the schizophrenic condition in every man. Even though the conclusion is written in the introduction, it is a tough task for the readers to realize the ending until they come in terms with the actual or the real time and not the other time-warps, i.e. the past moments or the future visualization. Billy Pilgrim's mental voyage to the alien planet, Tralfamadore exposes him to the reality that life is nothing about the past, present or the future and his understanding of the concept of time entirely changes and he eagerly wants to communicate this new vision he has learned from others. But when he manages to do the same, he is undoubtedly regarded as mad.

The understanding of time by the Tralfamadoreans is revolutionary and interesting.

A Tralfamadorean explains to Billy the concept of time- structure: It would take another earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorean seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is... (SHF: 86) This time theory and the consequences of events as viewed by the Tralfamadoreans are imbibed by Billy striking a remarkable awareness in his life. Thus this change in his outlook has effected a change in his manner of experiencing the life ahead and it reveals a new concept of reality. The authors project these time shifts in an absurd manner only to make it a reflection of the absurdity of human condition. It is understood that a cyclical or an illogical narrative is not a new concept, but the haphazard movement of the narratives is a postmodernist contribution to literature. Language and Reality Language is powerful because it is equated with reality. A postmodern writer would find this statement strange since the concept of reality in a postmodern world is a much debated concept. For in a postmodern world, there is no one reality, but plural realities. Similarly the

language that reflects this reality is also plural in nature. It can give rise to many interpretations. The postmodern thought has come to see language as a discontinuous process of interpretation. Temporal disorders, pastiche, distortions of narrative line, fragmentations, paranoia are symptoms of the language disorders or schizophrenia as well as features of postmodern fiction. Postmodernism thus favours random play rather than purposeful action, surface rather than depth. This random play of words expressing fragmented language does try to exemplify the failure of language to convey meaning. Most of the postmodern fiction reflects fundamental discontinuities in language, thought and behavior to give a picture of the apparently absurd world. This linguistic discontinuity is well exemplified in the select novels for study. Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut utilize language in its fragmented form, structure and adapt various means in language to convey anti-war feelings as well as the absurdity that is projected as the theme of both the novels. The language used in these novels does not allow the readers to sit back for a casual reading, but rather it pulls them out of the conventional reading scheme and destabilizes their concepts of linear narratives. Joseph Heller has impressed readers with his discontinuous language that inevitably projects absurdity. His novel *Catch-22* demonstrates humorous dialogues that contain many nuances and it shows its potential for non-communication, its often inherent circularity, its repetitions and contradictions and its inconsequentiality. The illogical reasoning in his dialogues and extended dialogues which are circular in pattern and form characterize the irrationality and concur with non-linear narrative thread in the novel. Along with such extended and circular dialogues, repetitions of certain phrases too abound confusion and exemplify the distortion of reality. The readers are at stake since the words and language used by Heller do not conform to reality; rather they turn the real as 'unreal' and 'absurd'. Another important aspect of Heller's style is its richly paradoxical language. He often makes a statement about an event which has taken place and deliberately omits the clarification which the statement requires. This invariably confuses the reader since he has presented the readers with two apparently contradictory statements about the same event, before even providing a clarification. An apt example of this paradoxical technique is the title of the novel that is an oft-repeated phrase 'Catch-22' which even is the title of the novel. *Catch-22* is composed of rules which apparently operate to make it impossible for a man to find a reasonable escape from them. These rules are intended to impose order in the midst of chaos. The phrase 'Catch-22' cuts on a

wide satirical and humorous path giving way to the mad logic that seems to Heller the essence of modern warfare. At the beginning of the novel, Yossarian tries to escape from the situation he is in. When he attempts to argue logically against flying more missions, he gets to know about Catch-22. As explained by Doc Daneeka to Yossarian, the 'Catch-22' is "a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded; all he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions" (C22: 62-63). This Catch-22 indeed becomes a catch and regulates the characters in the novel. These irregularities and circularities of the Catch-22 have a spinning effect; it comes back to the same point where it started. Yossarian, since he distrusts the credibility of the catch breaks away from this uncertainty and decides to escape from his war situation to Sweden. The confusion caused by language or messages is explicitly seen in the example of Doc Daneeka who is 'confirmed' dead in official documents, as his name is entered in Mc Watt's flight list. He finds it so insufficient to convince anyone that he is really alive. Language here takes on a powerful turn to convey paradox and confusion, while the very presence of a character does not tend to be credible. Vonnegut's uniqueness lies in his writing style in his well-known novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, since it employs fantastic elements which are mingled with the factual picture of the bombing of the city of Dresden. The novel skips from episode to episode in a non-specific order that forms an illogical mess. The episodes switch between the war situations and the exciting happening of his alien planet, Tralfamadore, in which Billy Pilgrim seeks refuge from the absurd world. The incorporation of these fantasies makes his language to conceal the truth or rather not ready to face the truth.

But Vonnegut himself tells in the first chapter of the novel: I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I have to do would be to report what I had seen... But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then...(SHF: 2)

The novel does not conform to a traditional chronological structure. This can be illustrated by analyzing the novel. It is written in short chapters, trying to reflect the mind of the protagonist, who is portrayed as a schizophrenic or rather insane. This is the result of the absurdity of the world leading to fragmented realities. Vonnegut uses his language embodying the structure of the novel to support insanity as a by-product of war. This chaotic structure was a deliberate attempt by the writer.

While handing over the book to his publisher Sam, Vonnegut tells him:

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 quite after a massacre. And it always is, except for the birds. And what do birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?' (SHF: 19) Vonnegut has skillfully employed motif or a recurrent phrase throughout his novel to convey the structure of the novel. The phrase that occurs around more than a hundred times in the novel of around two hundred and odd pages is 'So it goes'. This phrase contributes to the tone of the novel and it conveys a new reality, a reality that explicates the inexplicable. The phrase is ironically placed following immediately after the report of any death, or anything approximating a death in the novel. The repetition of this phrase is working upon the playful narrative style and on the development as well as progress of events in the novel. Instances of this phrase incorporated in the novel are many, which include even at the time of Billy Pilgrim's own wife's death. As Daniel Cordle says, Vonnegut's intention is to defamiliarize the readers from the conventional and comfortable story-telling technique.... the use of repetition, particularly of the cold response to death in the phrase 'So it goes', is placed alongside subtle variation in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This tension between repetition and variation produces a significant different meaning to the 'natural' beginning/ middle/ end structure of stories. What Vonnegut effectively does, therefore is to defamiliarize us from a form of narrative development, which has become naturalized in realist prose, allowing us to see it, and the meanings produced by it, afresh. (Cordle 2000: 176) The final phrase 'Poo-tee-weet' in the novel that takes on a comical touch, affirms the reality, the absurdity of man's existence. It clearly shows that words cannot convey any sense to human in the postmodern setting. It is only a bird's incoherent language that signifies the reduction of the humans and their lives into an absurd pictorial frame. Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut uses the fragmentation of time and narrative (language) in order to unify the non-linear narratives and even to distort the reality that prevails within the setting. Since the dominant technique employed by these postmodern writers is paradox or rather irony, the frame of reality is unavailable at the face of contradictions, not because it is unknown, but because postmodern fiction highlights the constructed notion that there is no one reality and no sanctioned reality, instead only a distorted, fictionalized and hallucinated reality.

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