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REFLECTION OF POSTMODERNISM IN  
KURT VONNEGUT'S SELECTED FICTIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is known as one of the best American postmodern writers in XX century. This paper attempts to look at three steps of postmodernism in three of his most popular novels, such as *Player Piano*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-five*. It will categorize the evolutionary process of postmodernism in these novels. The steps include accumulation, synthesis, and autonomy. Through *Player Piano*, accumulation copes with the separation between nature and culture in postmodernism. It investigates the presence of the objects made of nature and culture. Through *Cat's Cradle*, synthesis will show the center of the evolution. And finally through Vonnegut's magnum opus *Slaughterhouse-five*, autonomy will touch on his achievement as an autonomous entity.

**Key Words:** postmodern; science fiction; Kurt Vonnegut; accumulation; synthesis; autonomy.

**INTRODUCTION**

Kurt Vonnegut's fictions have been categorized as science fiction and postmodernism. Many examples of postmodernism are found in his works. His postmodernism often involves an answer to the facts of the world which will be discovered through science and technology. But what is the relationship between postmodernism and science? Jean Francois Lyotard, the French philosopher, states that our world with has all kinds of social and cultural changes which has no connection with scientific fundamentals of different values in our life. In human everyday life, there are individuals addressing us with their own subjects (p.98). Lyotard believes that science is a sort of story-telling that should be compared with the contemporary science in the world. There are varying fields in science that follow this goal. That kind of science which is used for goodness and truths will help human life. Moreover, science harmonizes itself with advancement and knowledge. And humans believe in it, not for its certainty or goal, but for its usages and skills. Lyotard knows modernism as a cultural movement described by continuous changes in chasing after progress. Consequently, postmodernism also contains modernity that is about

the modern period of human life with new technological means, such as computer and the Internet. Lyotard is one of those philosophers who argue that our current society has literally become close to postmodern steps, including accumulation, synthesis, and autonomy. In the next section, I will take a look at three steps of postmodernism in Vonnegut's selected works.

**ACCUMULATION IN *PLAYER PIANO* (1952)**

*Player Piano* is associated with the first step of the postmodern era. This novel was ignored by many literary critics due to being in the genre of science fiction which was regarded as a low grade of fiction. It was ignored as a novel which does not depict the realities, but only fantasy of Vonnegut concerning the technological future world. Moreover, Vonnegut was classified as a science fiction novelist only due to the technology used in his novels. He thought that he was acceptable between people but they disregarded him. In *Player Piano*, the writer starts with a tone of oddness that is about people, setting, and the protagonist Dr. Paul Proteus.

The characters in this novel center on Vonnegut's contemporary people. There are three kinds of men, including the Modern Men, the Postmodern Men, and the Quasi-object. Modern men such as Bud, Shepherd, and Mr. Cronor believe in artificial objects. Postmodern men, such as Finnerty, Lasher, Luke, and Haycox rely on the nature instead of the cultural objects. But people between these two kinds, Quasi-objects, link the space between the previous two kinds. For example, Paul Proteus links the mechanical and ordinary life.

The Postmodern men are very similar to this fiction's characters. Every one of them is filled with horror, concern, and death. Finnerty is a communist and paranoid man that wants to commit suicide. He is depicted as a person who is always feeling of death. Since there is a communist atmosphere in the novel, Vonnegut makes an attempt to warn against communism in the society in America. Paul sounds like the voice of Vonnegut and Lasher is his emotional voice in the story. The automatic piano makes horrible sounds, but when Finnerty plays it, its sound is not that horrible. This shows the title "Player Piano" given by Vonnegut that is about a piano which is automatic to play. We usually need a player to play piano for making sound, but there is a programmed and automatic piano which plays itself without any player. But when we compare its sound with the sound composed by Finnerty, they show the difference between man-made and machine-made sound. In sum, this novel depicts the fight between nature and culture as two key factors that differentiate modernism which shows only culture and does not believe in the existence of nature from postmodernism which was born by merging of nature with culture. Cultures are man-made than natural and this piano as a part of culture is built by a man and it depicts its dominance on nature. This piano is considered as the most primary of computer as the image of culture.

In *Player Piano* and some other Vonnegut's works, the protagonists cry when an animal is dead, but they never cry when a human is dead. It shows the downfall of humanity in the Modern men who cannot prevent the two catastrophic world wars. After the Modern men, the Postmodern men neglected to their own kind, but they had lots of attentions for animals. Besides, they dislike the machines. Hence, they try to confront it, but the sense of hatred leaves them only after their death. As a result, Vonnegut states, "all you need is something stainless steel, slated like a woman, covered with sponge rubber, and heated to body temperature ... I'm sick of being treated like a machine!" (14)

Vonnegut makes an attempt to make his own failed utopia in *Player Piano* quite simply than the

dystopian novels of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984* or Ira Levin's *This Perfect Day*. From the very beginning of the novel to the end, it is not difficult to see his attempt. The writer creates his fictional paradise in a very simple way, full of corporate men. There are some characters that we might not have seen them in our everyday life. Jerome Klinkowitz in his book says that, "*Player Piano* is near the realistic pole of science fiction; its aim is more to satirize corporate life in the 1950s than to fantasize about a profoundly different world in the distant future" (23). In addition, Vonnegut's style of writing in this work proves to be postmodern because he attempts to start it very close to the end to the extent that he can. He begins this novel by Paul's struggle to become the society alive and to break out the revolt which fails the coexistence of both nature and culture. After that, he starts to depict his presence to his readers as a predominant novelist. Besides, people in postmodern era usually inherit the past and they use it in the ridiculous way. For Lasher, the society in the story is already existed in the past.

Pastiche is one of the literary techniques used in this novel that is when many styles or languages used in a fiction. For example, in *Player Piano*, Paul has begun to read a story in which its protagonist is out of Paul's place. It is considered as a technique of pastiche. Moreover, Vonnegut uses the idea of aliens when Paul tries to detach himself from the corporate society. All in all, most characters in this fiction are sacrificed by the plot narrated by both society and a person. They all become paranoid like Paul by which they have feeling of death in themselves. Therefore, Vonnegut makes fun of his fictional modernist utopian world. Obviously, a utopian world must give its people a perfect life, but there is not such perfect life in the society of this novel. In a utopian society, there should be no changes; but in this novel, Paul undertakes many changes. In general, people admire the machines and simultaneously blame them. Those people who love the machines are definitely their inventors which do not depend on them, but those who are hatred of the machines are their dependents. Vonnegut depicts both the high culture and low culture as the major features of postmodernism, and low culture is considered for dystopian settings. According to Stanley Shatt, *Player Piano* is a dystopian novel,

*Player Piano* is an anti-utopian [dystopian] novel, a very respectable genre that includes such classic as E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, Eugene Zamiatin's *We*, and George Orwell's *1984*. (Shatt 10)

Vonnegut states that he stole Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*'s plot which it ripped off from Zamiatin's *We*. The above-mentioned science fictions usually are related with the governments that know their societies as utopia while they rule them evidently under dystopic system. This fiction also attempts to show the

readers differences in the precise meaning of utopia and dystopia. It depicts a satirical society where the modern people create a machine to annihilate other machines. It ridicules the oppressors and their decisions to build machines. Vonnegut depicts the evolution of a modern society which is stepping into dehumanization. Paul is a solution for making this society balanced. He joins an association that is completely based on human emotion. While he is listing the things is using them in his life, he forgets to name one product of nature that shows how this era has neglected nature. The important irony is that he states his wife in the list of things,

To date, Paul's hands had learned to do little save grip a pen, pencil, toothbrush, hair brush, razor, knife, fork, spoon, cup, glass, faucet, doorknob, switch, handkerchief, towel, zipper, button, snap, bar of soap, book, comb, wife, or steering wheel. (390)

In addition, Paul and his friends face with different evidences of dehumanization at the end of the story. Since this is a postmodern fiction, so it attempts to narrate the life of Paul with an open end. Hence, Vonnegut demonstrates his move from modernism to postmodernism to us. In this novel, He shows diverse characteristics, such as paranoia, postmodern men, quasi-object, open-endedness, pastiche and Intertextuality. He shows the moves in the values and conditions of society skillfully, as well.

### SYNTHESIS IN *CAT'S CRADLE* (1963)

*Cat's Cradle* is a fiction in which Vonnegut uses the first-person narrative. In this novel which is written after the Second World War, he depicts a worldwide annihilation with a deadly chemical weapon that is capable to freeze the whole universe. The second step is synthetic which Vonnegut enters postmodernism into society of this novel, such as culture, religion, science, etc. Postmodern writers like Vonnegut touch every cultural, economic and political aspect. The current step is interdisciplinary which contains every field that is interrelated. In this novel, Jona is a character who narrates the events of his life which makes the readers to see them instead of hearing Jona himself. In the novel, Bokononism is presented as a new religion which mocks other religions which it proves that it is not a Christian-based story, rather it is a tool that the writer applies to satirize Christianity. Bokonon himself believes that his false religion is only lie; "I agree that all religions, including Bokononism, are nothing but lies" (103). To Bernard Rosenberg, there are two changes in the synthetic step in postmodernism; the first change is cultural change; and the second change is technological development.

Important social and cultural changes were taking place, these changes included the rise of technological domination and the

development of a mass culture of universal sameness. (Ward 11)

Through Jona Vonnegut draws our attention to the question of identity and culture. He illustrates the features of a science fiction in this novel. He tracks a narrative procedure in it which is called prolepsis. Prolepsis makes a story start with a flash forward and attempts to keep the story telling in advance or even putting us in the middle where we have to wait for the rest of the story. In the same way, he gives clues about the end of the novel that to present it as an apocalyptic story. His attempt is purposeful in extricating both real and fictional worlds. Vonnegut's novel is about the future events and he suggests that we should not procrastinate discovering patterns and meaning to our history. In *Cat's Cradle*, the events do not mean the whole story. Vonnegut believes that it is significant for authors to have subjects that they greatly care about. Also this fiction is based on people's hobbies. He titled this fiction as a game which is usually played by children. In this game, children hold a spring in between two hands and ask other kid to find the cat which is not there; lastly the child figures out that there is a cat or not. In *Cat's Cradle*, everything for Felix who is one of the characters is like a game; "why should I bother with made-up games when there are so many real ones going on?" (29). For instance, he ends his investigation on the nuclear weapon and starts to do research on turtles. Through Felix, Vonnegut satirizes his contemporary scientists. Frank, son of Felix, throughout the story thinks about investigation or includes himself in the it. Newt another son of Felix is a painter. In the novel, Newt repeatedly says "see, see, *Cat's Cradle*" that he does not want to talk about the childish game in here, but as a result of his father's deeds and activities. There is no cat or cradle in the story, and Vonnegut asks us to seek for the cat's cradle. He intends to show us the vanity of life in which there are many tangles and knots without meaning.

Vonnegut uses a hidden concept by using of different culture and relates them correctly. To him, men are living like machines far from knowing the goal or inspiration of living. Vonnegut believes that God has planned our lives which we are not looked to understand; even if we try to understand it, it would only be unsuccessful. Vonnegut criticizes science and scientists not only in this novel but also in his other works. He attempts to remove the borderline between real and unreal and it gives a place for *Cat's Cradle* in the second step of postmodernism.

*Cat's Cradle* gives no meaning and it is full of lies, according to its writer. He subscribes to the postmodern ideas that the world only can be known by language. To many realistic writers, the world outside language is not stable. Every person experiences and describes the world around with the

help of language. This novel is a struggle between truth and lie, between real and unreal. This sentence can be a good example in it in which Jona says to the secretary, “Breed keeps telling me the main thing with Dr. Hoenikker [Felix] was truth. You don’t seem to agree. I don’t know whether I agree or not. I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, can be enough for a person” (22). Here, Vonnegut tries to say show that the complete lack of real communication between God believers to solve their problems and Breed’s scientific community, which is completely separated from any anxiety for the spiritual and moral issues along with the building of nuclear bomb. Concerning Felix and this problem that he does not believe others’ truth, I think that he only believes his own truth to be the absolute.

Vonnegut’s narrating method is autobiographical in this novel. Jona is the same character Jonah in the Bible, and the writer himself. Vonnegut introduces us to the thoughts of Jona who time travels into the past. He sees the walls which are turned into tunnels that guide him to the past. This happening leads us to the real world when the writer tries to present himself in history. In the past, Jona sees a tombstone which belongs to Kurt Vonnegut; and this is the real life character that Jona thinks to be that of his predecessor’s. Metafictionally speaking, this event blurs the distance between fiction and reality. These intertextual elements in this novel also include the reference to real life characters such as Enrico Caruso, Franklin Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on. The writer intends to create a characters from previous works and historical characters.

Vonnegut in this novel tries to point out that the modern world does not contain a humanistic approach, neither science nor religion. And this approach will cause an apocalypse for the human life. He uses Ice-9 to show the interrelated nature of the world. It moves from one place to the other and finally causes the apocalypse. Vonnegut through his fictional religion, Bokononism which is a mixture of concepts from other religions, tries to remind us humans of humanity, and makes us to rethink the meaning of God. For the followers of this religion, God is not important. It ridicules the meaninglessness of life. The writer fills the gap created by his contemporary science with humanity. His fictional religion is made up of lies that help people realize that every other religion is no different from it. He uses cultural relativity in this fiction in which one cultural structure is different from others. In the time of Vonnegut, cultural relativism became a method to learn the other culture to bridge different cultures.

In *Cat’s Cradle*, we can see the identity crisis. In the pre-modern era, nobody had problems in forming personality and identity. In the modern era, people

had to have different personalities and identities like father, mother, teacher, boss, doctor etc. But in the postmodern era, identity is seen as a crisis in which people confront with different characters in front of themselves to select one from. In this novel, Jona lives as a Christian. After, he becomes a Bokononist. And at the end of the story, he has no religion, family, morality etc.

This novel could be as an example of a humorous apocalyptic fiction. Vonnegut like many American writers has tried to create apocalyptic fiction, but in a humorous way. This Apocalyptic way represents a key moment in the linear movement of history from the fall to ultimate redemption. In this story, Newt paints a picture of a cat’s cradle to highlight the meaninglessness of life. Bokonon also writes a book to emphasize that this meaningless life becomes meaningful through honest lies. In his book, he says that people should stop learning from their mistakes. Following the teachings of this book and what Bokonon asks them to do, people of San Lorenzo in the story commit suicide; the main reason for this strange action is having no belief in life after death. Bokonon himself feels pleased to do it. The end of his book is the end of the *Cat’s Cradle*. Then, Vonnegut in this novel marks the evolution of postmodernism and evolution of himself.

#### **AUTONOMY IN *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE***

After the synthesis step, postmodernism achieves autonomy. In this part, this paper, along with highlighting of “autonomy” as another postmodern step, surveys the full-grown postmodern novel of Vonnegut that is *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This fiction is a typical instance of postmodern fiction, because all features of this movement are in this novel. The autonomy step is a general term that many novelists and writers are forced to use it. This is the time when different branches of postmodernism began to leave postmodernism in order to grow separate from their umbrella term. That is only because of the growing of the two earlier steps: accumulation and synthesis. This step is included in international capitalism.

To Fredric Jameson, capitalism includes: Market capitalism which belongs to late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century based on the advances of industries; monopoly capitalism which is also called imperialistic capitalism in which occupying other colonies’ markets; and multinational or international capitalism which is created in the new globalized market and began to spread its dominant throughout the different countries, however it is not a good capitalism due to weakening national and individual identity. Postmodernists are worried that capitalism might one day become the narration of the whole societies, and

such a worry is existed in Vonnegut and his novel too. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he has used telephone, radio, flight etc. which they have made the world smaller. In addition, the autonomy step turns its focus to the market where information is sold via the Internet. The age of autonomy separates from modernism and is known as postmodernism.

Many critics claim that postmodernist writers do not believe in history, such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Francis Fukuyama. They argue that they no longer believe in history as a meta-narrative rather they think that images from history are only reprocessed and they have no connection with the primary text. This novel relies on the ontological questions which raise questions about the status of the reality and the world. The writer tries to restructure the view of the fiction writing and the view of the world. Jameson says that “postmodern literature offers little scope for resistance: the distinction between high art and popular culture has been affected by the commodification of artistic production” (Malpas 26).

This novel can be approached from different methods that make this fiction a standalone work by giving autonomy to the writer. In the first chapter of this novel, he explains that this novel will be ended by the bombing of Dresden. He says, “This one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins [of Dresden] for taking a teapot and he’s shot by a firing squad” (6). The story deals with Vonnegut’s experience of the Dresden bombing. He has made an attempt to write it by openly entering the story. He suggests this fiction not only as an anti-war work, but also as an anti-narrative fiction. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he, by his key character Billy Pilgrim, shows that free will is not existed. He says that, “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time [and] has no control over where he is going next” (5). It shows that Billy has been unstuck by time, and in general, humans cannot control the path which their life takes. Billy travels in time by entering into the room of different years; 1961, 1967, 1944, and 1923. He can see his death and birth and beyond it. Vonnegut through the character of Billy goes back to the Dresden bombing that he saw in many years back.

To Jerome Klinkowitz, “Vonnegut was developing as a novelist just at the time when literary critics and theorists were declaring that the novel was dead” (70). Other critics also argue that Vonnegut’s narration of the world in just a few pages is against of the law. In this situation, the writer has narrated a story that illustrates the deaths in Dresden. He tries to narrate through a language which has different signs showing an end. Klinkowitz continues, “His experience with the matter of Dresden, coupled with the fate of the novel in his time, dictated that a

traditional approach to the subject would not yield a suitable result” (11). Therefore, Vonnegut has taken a postmodern way of novel writing instead of the traditional way. In an interview, he says that there are no benefits for any person from the bombing, but for himself. He also humorously says that he earns a dollar for murdering every character of his story. The first chapter, many of Vonnegut’s failed attempted are seen. We will be permitted to listen through his narration who will be narrating from the basement of slaughterhouse-five. He did not personally witness the incident as he would later have been able to narrate it. He failed in sketching the novel not due to making it a postmodern rather it was his incapability to connect the events. He failed as well in gathering information from O’Hare. But significantly, among few survivors of bombing, only Vonnegut had an idea of writing about it. Indeed there were no strong evidences to support his notion of penning a novel.

The story of *Slaughterhouse-Five* goes in a non-linear narrative style. Vonnegut chooses a style for narrating the story and uses it for the Tralfamadorians books too, because these fictional books contain many symbols and codes. Tralfamadorians do not read it word by word, but as a whole due to giving them a hint or picture. It is the same for this Vonnegut’s novel which has structured loosely chapters and events to give a whole picture when we read completely. He gives us the whole story in a regular style. In total, he has made a non-linear narrative style in this novel. In the story, the plot rotates within the present time. Billy observes everything as a constant happening revolving from past to future. When Vonnegut is very near to the frightening incidents of Dresden, it makes him not to forget it for more than twenty years. Nonetheless, he gets rid of it after twenty five years. Billy is created as a character with innocence, tameness, intelligence, endurance etc. He is not suitable for the war in comparing with the other soldiers. He does not have any motivation in living in such a situation. That is only because when he has a frightening memory from his childhood. So, all of these happenings make him a chicken. The aim of postmodern authors is to mock past mistakes and laugh at them. So, Vonnegut tries to give these events in his novel, makes them unimportant and illustrates as a picture to be laughed at. By his individual experience at Dresden, he makes this story suitable with the norms of science fiction genre. Jameson says,

Our postmodern society as one benefit of all historicity, whose own supposed past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles, the past as referent finds itself gradually bracketed, and then wiped out altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts (12).

For Vonnegut, history is not alterable, so he comes back to the same place to make his frightening memories less painful. Simultaneously, he is aware of the difficulty which is existed in illustrating the terrible happenings. The movement that Vonnegut creates his fictions makes a parody of life in the modern age. Even *Slaughterhouse-Five* confirms the postmodernist feature of parody. Vonnegut makes an attempt to make a parody or a humorous imitation of wars in this novel. In addition, he describes things and events ahead to prepare us not for a terrible shock but for laughter. We can see in the novel that whenever Billy blinks his eyes, he would confront with another happening in history. He is not a mad character; he is like every other normal people. He is different from others in understanding of life and trying to live as it is. He knows that he would be imprisoned by the Tralfamadorians, but he is not shocked because he has seen this happening before. The idea of travelling to another planet shows his hatred of the Earth and the isolation on it.

In the whole story, Vonnegut focuses on alienation and isolation in order to satiate his dream for a utopian world. He tries to link all of the problems in his time and happiness in this novel. He uses the ingenious techniques not only in the novel, but also in the book of Tralfamadore which is a fictional book within *Slaughterhouse-Five*. His notion about free will corresponds with notion of life by Mark Twain, “allowing his satire to encompass a broad range of topics, from education, religion, and advertising to a distinctly Twains diatribe against the curse of free will” (Klinkowitz 21). Vonnegut illustrates that humans do not have free will, through Tralfamadorians which are an alien race in this novel. These aliens have the ability to see in four dimensions which the fourth one is time. Therefore, they can see everything that has occurred and will occur simultaneously. In their view, all happenings in time are unchangeable and fixed, and they cannot comprehend the notion of free will – “If I had not spent so much time studying Earthlings [language], I would not have any idea what was meant by ‘free will’” (86). As these aliens (the Tralfamadorians) could see in four dimensions, Billy also can break away from every dreadful incident with a blink. With such a feature, in my view, he could be ‘Übermensch’, a concept coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which it means ‘Over Man’ that signifies the man who breaks away from key values and moralities. Herewith Vonnegut has made a fresh and different way of perceiving life. As war is dreadful, he often keeps himself and his story narrating aside from the war. Besides, he narrates beautiful things to suggest us that there is gladness everywhere.

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#### Imagologie: du voyage à l'étude des images réciproques.

#### L'exemple de voyages français en Russie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

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#### Résumé

L'imagologie étudie les représentations, dans une œuvre littéraire, de l'étranger : pays et peuples. Cette forme de critique s'est donné un domaine précis. A travers l'étude de quelques récits de voyages français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (Mme de Staël, Dumas, Gautier) en Russie, on peut observer la création et la transformation des images dans les voyages et la fiction, les deux genres échangeant leurs représentations de l'altérité.

**Mots-clefs :** littérature de voyage, imagologie, Russie, littérature du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.