Kurt Vonnegut's Stylistic Inventiveness in His Use of Telegraphic Schizophrenic Black Humour

Iulia Veronica Neagu

Abstract: *A very important part of Kurt Vonnegut's life was when he served in World War II and was a prisoner of war in Dresden, which affected him greatly. His experiences are rendered in his famous* Slaughterhouse-5*, the novel under discussion in the present paper, which is truly unique in point of inventiveness, style and structure, further upholding the anti-war theme and the text's black humour. Besides the classical traits of black humour, shared by most black humorists, Vonnegut adds his distinctive stylistic characteristics that contribute to his singular form of black humour, i.e. the use of multiple narrative perspectives, the random time structure, the combination of trivial and high literature, lexical inventiveness, the play upon emotional detachment and involvement in the story, parallel verbal motifs, illustrations, the oral rhythm, the poetical stylistic devices, and the appeal to the readers' senses, which makes the experience of black humour a total and all-encompassing one.*
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A very important part of Vonnegut's life was when he served in World War II and was a prisoner of war in Dresden, which affected him greatly. His experiences are rendered in his famous *Slaughterhouse-5*, which is truly unique in point of inventiveness of style and structure, further upholding the anti-war theme and the text's black humour.

The majority of the book is written in the past tense, but the narrator occasionally uses the present tense – especially in the first and last chapters – when speaking from a personal point of view as Kurt Vonnegut. The reporting of Billy's speech is in the present tense (for example "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Or so he *says*" [1]. Intermittently, the tense switches to future, as when Billy describes his future death. As far as the writing style of *Slaughterhouse-5* is concerned, there aren't too many adjectives. The novel's writing is minimalist and dry, and Vonnegut tends to write in short, declarative sentences. The tone of the novel is spare, elusive and deadpan.

The title page of *Slaughterhouse-5* is an original example of the fusion of laughter and pain, of humour and blackness. A kind of pun that reads somewhat like a short prayer, the title page not only affirms the author's personal connection to the narrative that follows (itself a prayer that no more Dresdens will occur to haunt future generations) and to the unusual *telegraphic schizophrenic* manner in which it will be told; it also begins Vonnegut's story before its actual beginning. Even the page's typography, which forms the outline of a bomb with the all-important word *peace* at its tip, serves as a comment on the violence of war and it is an integral part of the novel's black humour and resourcefulness.

The complete title of the novel is *Slaughterhouse-5, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. It is, at the same time, surprising and black humourish by the unusual juxtaposition of terms: the noun *children* is associated with the nouns *slaughterhouse*, *death* and *crusade*, while the noun *dance* is associated with the nouns *duty* and *death*. The triple titles on the title page and the unique association of terms synthesize the novel's major events at the same time that they suggest the insufficiency of any title to encapsulate the experiences Vonnegut describes.

Slaughterhouse-5 is the actual address of the one hundred American prisoners of war in Dresden; they were housed in the fifth building of an old slaughterhouse, originally built as a shelter for pigs about to be butchered.

One of the most resourceful stylistic elements of the novel is the unique way of combining narrative perspectives. The nineteen-page first chapter is more an author's preface giving personal background and attitudes. Hence, the presence of the narrator within the novel is one of the most important stylistic idiosyncrasies of Vonnegut's writing.

Vonnegut starts his novel with the following paragraph:

> "All of this happened, *more or less*. The war parts, anyway, are *pretty much* true. One guy *I* knew ***was*** shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that *wasn't* his. Another *guy I* knew really ***did*** threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And *so on*. *I've* changed all the names."

The first noticeable feature of the above fragment is the colloquial tone which is expressed by the usage of contractive forms such as *wasn't*, *I've* as well as the use of italics (***was*** and ***did***) to indicate the

stressed words within the sentence in order to emphasize, or by the use of colloquial words and expressions such as *guy*, *so on*, *more or less*, *pretty* as a modifier of *much*.

Vonnegut keeps this colloquial tone throughout the whole novel and it undoubtedly helps to raise the readers' attention and create the sense of being welcome to listen as they can perceive the author's trust to tell them something personal and private.

Another specific aspect of this paragraph and the whole chapter One, which is also evident from the colloquial nature, is its personal quality. First-person narrator using the first-person pronoun "I" (repeated three times in the above paragraph) does not refer to one of the characters in the fictional world of the novel, but it is used to immediately establish the narrative voice as the author-narrator. In chapter One, Vonnegut keeps the same narrative perspective collapsing the three discourse levels into one author-narrator-character which is primarily used in autobiographies. At the end of chapter One, Vonnegut-narrator reveals that he has finished his war book now and pre-establishes the opening and closing words of the fictional part of the novel:

> "It begins like this:
> *Listen:*
> *Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.*
> It ends like this:
> *Poo-tee-weet?*" (p. 22)

by means of which the author clearly implies that he is the storyteller.

The first question the reader is confronted with after reading the first paragraph of the novel is the question of truth. Vonnegut, on the one hand, claims that his novel is not fictitious, but, on the other hand, he also states that everything only happened *more ore less*, thus restricting the truth of the story. Does the story depict reality or even truth, or is it a work of fiction? Vonnegut intentionally leaves this question for the reader to answer, adding another facet to the novel's black humour.

The remaining nine chapters are different from the first chapter. The narrative perspective changes right at the beginning of chapter Two, employing the traditional technique of omnipresent and omniscient third person narrator, commonly used in fictional works. Nevertheless, the author's presence as a character is felt in many instances within the remaining chapters of the book by means of his remarks. Here is an example of a sudden unexpected one-line

comment which breaks into the middle of an episode describing the Americans' digestion problems, who, having eaten properly after a long starvation period, all suffer from diarrhoea:

> "The place *was crammed* with Americans who *had taken their pants down*. An American near Billy *wailed* that *he had excreted everything but his brains*. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go'. *He meant his brains*.
> *That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.*
> Billy reeled away from his vision of Hell." (pp. 125-6)

This extract is important not only for Vonnegut's entering his tale of Billy's life explicitly but it also revels one branch of poetical devices (another ingenious feature of Vonnegut's style) that contributes to the oral rhythm, which will be discussed in more detail further on. An example of poetical device used here is the repetition of the syntagm *That was*, and the use of the synonym *me* for the pronoun *I*, and of the paraphrase *the author of this book*.

The plastic, descriptive, grotesque image in this fragment, which is obviously a mark of black humour, is supported by the use of the verbs *to cram* and *to excret* and of the predicate plus direct object *had taken their pants down*. Also, one may notice the ironic tinge, which is expressed by the assertion *He had excreted everything but his brains* and the superfluous comment *He meant his brains*. The verb *to wail*, which expresses pain and suffering is an extremely inspired choice from the part of the author as, together with the irony and the plastic image, make up the black humour of the passage.

The most extensive case when Vonnegut repeatedly refers to himself as *I* or *me* can be found in the final chapter, which can be seen as a blend of the fictional Billy's tale and Vonnegut's autobiographical comments of the same events. Particularly the very final autobiographical comment of the war events is the point in which Vonnegut comes closest to depict the fire bombing of Dresden: "Two days after *the city was destroyed*. Now Billy and the rest *were being marched* into the ruins. *I was there*. *O'Hara was there*." (p. 212) Notice here the use of the Passive Voice, *were being marched*, which expresses unwillingness from the part of the speaker and, of the repetition of verb plus adverb *was there*, which expresses, on the one hand, regret and, on the other hand, it stresses the idea of destruction depicted in the first sentence *The city was destroyed*. However,

paradoxically, in neither his autobiographical reminiscences nor in his fictional story is the bombing described directly.

The author asks himself if it is possible and sensible to write literature with regard to such horrible events. This is also explicitly expressed in the novel: "It is so *short and jangled*, Sam, because there is nothing *intelligent* to say about a *massacre*. *Everybody is supposed to be dead*." (p. 29).

In this excerpt, as opposed to the rest of the novel, where adjectives are extremely scarce, Vonnegut employs three adjectives, two forming a hendiadys, *short and jangled*, referring to his book, and the other, *intelligent*, preceded by the negative adverb *nothing*, referring to the firebombing of Dresden. The tone of this passage is stern; Vonnegut uses words with a great force of assertion like the noun *massacre* or the past participle *dead*. The conclusion, *Everybody is supposed to be dead*, is grim and is meant to make the reader reflect upon the implications of such a massacre.

The conclusion of this fragment is probably the reason why Vonnegut doesn't directly describe the firebombing of Dresden or why he uses such simple language all through the novel, without many descriptive adjectives.

Vonnegut's narrative presence makes a crucial impact on the novel's tone. Besides the linguistic indicators, the reminiscences, the discussions with the O'Hares, the openness in declaring his difficulties with the subject of war, all point towards Vonnegut being a truthful narrator. His authenticity is vital to the telling of this extraordinary, often horrifying, story and it consistently contributes to its black humour.

Another device Vonnegut makes use of, which proves his stylistic inventiveness, a device which is also extremely relevant for the novel's black humour, is the combination of trivial and high literature. Traditionally, these two levels of literature are not combined, as they are considered to be commensurate. Both theses types of literature usually represent different levels of style, language and meaning. In using them together, Vonnegut deliberately breaks with this distinction, thus transforming humour into black humour, crossing the border between *black* and *humour* and mingling these two concepts together in a unique way.

He already starts with this technique in the first chapter. On the first two pages, Vonnegut introduces several examples of trivial or low literature. The postcard written by the taxi driver is quoted as well

as the obscene limerick and the cyclical story about Yon Yonson. Out of these we shall quote here the limerick, which is the most relevant:

> "There was a young man from Stamboul,
> Who *soliloquized* thus to his *tool*:
> ' You took all my wealth
> And you ruined my health,
> And now you won't pee, you old fool.'" (p. 14)

The use of the verb *to soliloquize*, which is evidently part of high literature, in the same context with the euphemism *tool*, which is part of trivial literature, is clearly ironic. Moreover, another interesting thing about this quotation, which stresses the author's irony, is that Vonnegut plays with registers of style, using this limerick in the same paragraph in which he quotes Horace's *Odes*: "Eheu, fugaces labuntur anni. My name is Yon Yonson. There was a young man from Stamboul" (p. 14). Hence, it becomes obvious that Vonnegut deliberately puts the quotation from Horace next to the trivial Yon Yonson – poem to achieve his aim.

It becomes apparent that Vonnegut combines the didactic level of high literature with the motivating effect of trivial literature, uniting two different kinds of literature in an attempt to create a black humour model no author has ever created before.

Reading the quotation from Horace (trans. *Alas, our fleeting years pass away*), which most probably comments upon the destruction of Dresden, the reader becomes aware of the consequences caused by the attack on Dresden, i.e. the black part of black humour, reading the limerick, or postcard written by the taxi driver, or the song about Yon Yonson – and many other examples could be quoted – the reader might be amused, thus Vonnegut managing to render the funny part of black humour. In other words, Vonnegut succeeds in combining horror and humour in a revolutionary way.

Another attention-grabbing point is the fact that the passage quoting Horace is itself also embedded in another quotation. Thus, Vonnegut quotes a quotation in a quotation. This device is a typical example of a technique called *regressus in infinitum*. Vonnegut wants to point out that there is no real starting point for anything. He also makes this obvious by putting the first and the last sentences of his novel next to each other, thus claiming that time is not linear but cyclical or spiral.

And this brings us to another highly original stylistic feature, which characterizes Vonnegut's book, i.e. time structure.

The *telegraphic schizophrenic manner* of writing, overtly asserted from the very beginning by Vonnegut, matches perfectly the novel's random, skipping timeline, which presents an effective method of representing man's inability to live a normal life after experiencing modern warfare. *Slaughterhouse-5* represents a disjointed collage of Billy Pilgrim's life, which gets translated directly to the disjointed collage of the narrative.

A traditional novel might start with a youthful Billy Pilgrim and follow him into old age or with an elderly protagonist who flashes back on his life. Billy, however, adopts a Tralfamadorian attitude because it is the only way he can make sense of the loose grip on time he is left after the war. In order to follow him, the narrative approximates the same attitude.

The manner of writing of a Tralfamadorian novel is discussed in chapter Five. This peculiar way of writing also reflects the concept of time Vonnegut employs in conceiving his own novel:

> "Each clump of symbols is a *brief*, *urgent* message describing *a situation*, *a scene*. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is *beautiful and surprising and deep*. There is *no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects*" (p. 47).

In the first sentence of the fragment, the striking feature is the perfectly balanced syntactic structure. Vonnegut uses two binary syntactic structures, one made up of two adjectives, *brief* and *urgent*, and the other one made up of two nouns, *situation* and *scene*. After the first and second sentences, which are concise and to the point, the third and fourth sentences are more elaborated and intentionally disrupt the syntactic balance of the whole paragraph. In the second sentence, the author uses three adjectives linked by means of the coordinating conjunction *and* (*beautiful and surprising and deep*), while in the fourth sentence he uses an enumeration of seven nouns (*no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects*). This disrupted balance, which is manifest on the level of narrative technique and time structure, is also manifest on a linguistic level, as shown by the above fragment. One may easily make a

parallel here of the way reality before and after the war looks like. This parallel is reflected at a linguistic level as well. Before the war everything was balanced (fact which is stylistically manifest by the use of the two binary syntactic structures), while after the war everything is unbalanced and oversized (fact which is proven by the use of the seven nouns).

The concept of time is again brought up in another fragment, in which Billy tries to explain the Tralfamadorian view of its circularity as opposed to the linearity perceived by humans:

> "All *moments*, past, present, future, *always* have existed, *always* will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different *moments just the 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 the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments*" (p. 23).

In this fragment, except for the general idea expressed, that time is circular and not linear, one may notice the circularity conveyed at a linguistic and stylistic level as well.

The main stylistic devices used here are repetition, comparison and exemplification.

As far as repetition is concerned, Vonnegut uses the noun *moment*, in the singular or plural, eight times in this nine-line paragraph. On a surface level, the reader might be annoyed by this repetition but, on a deeper level, he might take into account the author's intention to stress, on the one hand, the Tralfamadorian view of time and, on the other hand, the circularity of the fragment. Vonnegut begins and ends the paragraph with the noun *moments*, thus stylistically and linguistically rendering its circularity. Also, every sentence contains at least one time the noun *moment(s)*, proving the consistency of Vonnegut's argumentation.

Here there can also easily been detected the use of words that indicate the permanence of time, like the adverbs *always* (repeated twice) and *forever* and the adjective *permanent*. By the use of the comparison *like beads on a string*, Vonnegut manages to render a very plastic image of time as seen by humans on earth. This comparison is,

afterwards, opposed to the two exemplifications Vonnegut employs in order to describe the Tralfamadorian perception of time.

The first exemplification is also a comparison of time to a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, which is again a very plastic image, while the second exemplification is a very good sample of black humour intrusion (*When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments*), expressed by the light and optimistic tone with which Tralfamadorians regard death and corpses.

Nevertheless, although the events taking place in the novel jump back and forth in time and place, a linear story does emerge out of the jumble of time-shifted details, which is linguistically supported by the skilful use of definite and indefinite reference.

Examining the narrative style of *Slaughterhouse-5* from the point of view of given and new information, it could be said that its third person narrative technique corresponds with the commonly used strategy of sequencing descriptive details using indefinite reference for unknown details and definite reference for known or already mentioned information. As a consequence, the readers tend to get a distanced bird's-eye view of the scene, characters and happenings, enabling them to perceive the story as outsiders who are allowed to take their own stand of what is described, although Vonnegut carefully and masterfully guides them all through the novel.

There are at least two examples of a deviating viewpoint from the common norm, which indicate, as asserted before, the fine manipulation of the reader by the author.

Chapter Two, which is basically the first chapter of the fictional part of the novel and therefore the beginning of the plot, opens with giving details on the main character Billy Pilgrim. There is nothing unusual about the narrative technique of this chapter as the third person narrator employs a typical strategy of indicating the new information by indefinite article and further reference to the given details is preceded by definite article. But this referential system is unexpectedly disrupted towards the end of the chapter when in the middle of a scene-describing paragraph, a definite reference appears among indefinite ones:

> "Weary kicked and shoved Billy for a quarter of a mile. The scouts were waiting between the banks of *a frozen creek*. They had heard *the* dog. They

> had heard men calling back and forth, too-calling like hunters who had a pretty good idea of where their quarry was." (p. 48).

The paragraph depicts the moment of Billy and Weary catching up the scouts who, being ahead, are waiting for them *in the banks of a creek*. The place as well as the happening is new to the characters and readers, too, so the reference to the *creek* and *men* is indefinite. At the same time, the narrator uses a definite article referring to *the dog*. This is not surprising because there is an earlier reference to the same dog a few pages backwards. However, the way Vonnegut uses definite and indefinite reference is rather unusual. The first mention of the dog can be found on page 42 and it just colours the situation of Weary being deep in his thoughts not paying attention to any outer sounds: "Somewhere *a big dog* was barking. Weary didn't hear that, either". (p. 42) The next reference to the dog is the one mentioned above, which, with the reference to the past happening, basically points at the same barking. The dog is mentioned next on the same page: "Somewhere *the big dog* barked again", and once again in the same chapter: "But then Weary saw that he had an audience. Five German soldiers and a police dog on a leash were looking down into the bed of the creek" (p.51).

Such a technique of re-emerging the same subject or situation affects the readers in three possible ways.

First, as the plot is neither continuous nor chronological and especially in the part where the phrase with the dog appears, it is heavily fragmented, the repeated mention of the dog helps the reader follow the line of the plot and find the connection between fragments of the story.

Second, it creates the sense of tension and alarm appealing to the reader's perception as there is obviously something that the narrator hides from them and therefore it increases their appetite to continue reading.

Last but not least, it is positioning the readers as people who are familiar with the scene and helps them to feel involved with what is going on.

This technique called *in medias res* can be found once more in chapter Three of the novel:

> "Billy and his group joined *the river of humiliation*, and *the late afternoon sun came out of the clouds*. *The Americans* didn't have the road to themselves. *The westbound lane boiled and boomed* with vehicles which

were rushing German reserves to the front. *The reserves* were *violent*, *windburned*, *bristly* men. *They had teeth like piano keys*" (p. 64).

Thanks to the usage of definite reference in the extract, Vonnegut achieves that the reader shares the perspective of the prisoners of war and gets an intensive impression of the situation. Nevertheless, such an involvement of the reader into the story is in contrast with the preceding paragraph which basically describes the same scene but obviously from a different angle. Here, the hordes of American soldiers are seen as if from a bird's eye view, looking like moving water being compared to a Mississippi of humiliated Americans flowing through the valley. The contrast created by ordering these passages one after another is a very powerful means that helps the readers perceive the situation from the perspective of an outer observer as well as somebody in the middle of things. Hence, Vonnegut manages to render the black humour of the paragraph by wonderfully blending emotion and the omniscient perspective.

Besides the use of definite reference, the paragraph is rich in stylistic devices that Vonnegut manages to combine in an ingenious manner in order to give rise to black humour. In the first sentence, Vonnegut uses a beautiful metaphor, *the river of humiliation*, which together with the positive, optimistic and, at the same time, somewhat ironic assertion, *the late afternoon sun came out of the clouds*, form one instance of black humour. The black humour here is also supported by the use of the coordinating conjunction, *and*, which brings together the negative and the positive.

Another instance of black humour is the ironic last sentence *They had teeth like piano keys*, which contains a surprising comparison, meant to render the image obtained more plastic for the readers and, thus, emotionally involve them in the scene.

Moreover, other contributors to the black humour of the excerpt are the hendiadys *boiled and boomed*, by means of which Vonnegut manages again to provide a plastic image that perfectly matches the metaphor from the first sentence, and the enumeration of the adjectives *violent*, *windburned*, *bristly*, which make up a triple syntactic structure on the sentence level, used to describe the German reserves, and which have a great force of assertion.

The most prominent stylistic device which attracts notice of anybody reading the novel is repetition of phrases.

The phrase *So it goes* is one example out of a number of repetitive devices in the novel. There is a sense of embittered humour with this

Tralfamadorian phrase, which is repeated over one hundred times in the novel. This fatalistic comment follows almost every mention of death or dissolution in the novel, from disinfecting clothes in which "bacteria and fleas were dying by the billions" (p, 32) to the peculiar death of Billy's father having been "shot dead by a friend while they were out hunting deer" (p. 84) and the massacre of Dresden. Vonnegut seems to use this phrase consciously in order to fuse his autobiographical narrative comments into the fictional part but, and this is more surprising and puzzling, the other way round. This phrase follows every mention of death in the novel, equalizing all of them, whether they are natural, accidental, or intentional, and whether they occur on a massive scale or on a very personal one. The phrase is consistent with the Tralfamadorian idea that although a person may be dead in a particular moment, he or she is alive in all other moments of his or her life, which coexist and can be visited over and over through time travel. Nevertheless, at the same time, the obsessive repetition of the phrase keeps a tally of the cumulative force of death throughout the novel, thus pointing out the tragic inevitability of death, on the one hand, and the black humour of the text as a whole, on the other.

At first, the saying can be looked upon as funny in an ironic way. However, as one reads further, the phrase becomes irritating and irreverent. At one point, the reader cannot fathom so many deaths meaning so little. This punctuation phrase forces the reader to look at the novel's deaths one after the other and not omit any of them. Ultimately, the repetition creates a feeling of resentment that too many people are killed. The saying is, in fact, a grim reminder that means exactly the opposite of what its words say.

In addition there are two other phrases which penetrate the factual as well as the fictive part of the novel. It is the phrase *and so on*, which helps to establish and hold the colloquial manner of the narration. The other parallel interwoven in the whole novel is *the smell of mustard gas and roses*, referring first to Vonnegut's drunken breath in chapter One, then to an anonymous man on the phone, the drunken breath of whom, Billy could almost smell through the receiver, and, finally, the smell is mentioned once more towards the end of the book in the simile "the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas" (p. 214), when depicting the process of ruins removal after the firebombing of Dresden.

All the three phrases are used throughout the autobiography-like chapter One and the remaining nine fictional chapter, and therefore

help to unify the narrative perspective of the whole novel. Moreover, they contribute to the group of poetical devices, the use of which is quite extensive in *Slaughterhouse-5*.

All through the novel there are other stylistic devices that are part of the class of poetical devices and that bring an important contribution to the novel's black humour**,** such as alliteration (***p**attered their horny **p**alms with **p**otato-mashed grenades* – p. 121; *The third bullet was **f**or the **f**ilthy **f**lamingo* – p. 55), assonance (*They were jerky l**i**ttle sc**i**ssors*. ***I**t was a ch**i**lly n**i**ght*, *and B**i**lly came **i**ndoors after a wh**i**le* – p. 63), polysyndeton (*There was food* in *the wagon*, ***and** wine*, ***and** a camera*, ***and** a stamp collection*, ***and** a stuffed owl*, ***and** a mantel clock* – p. 32), and allusions to high literature (there are numerous allusions used in the novel among which we can mention those to the Gideon Bible in chapter One, to the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky in chapter Five, to the New Testament also in chapter Five, to the land of Oz from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in chapter Six, to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe in chapter Nine or to *Ivanhoe* by Sir W. Scott in chapter Eight or to *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas in chapters One and Five).

Although *Slaughterhouse-5* may not be filled with delightful satire and comical scenes, there are accounts which force the reader to laugh although the situation is extremely serious.

The following excerpt, depicting the scene of the Germans guarding the imprisoned Americans, crammed up in wagons, waiting to be transported to the prisoners' camp in Dresden, is a typical example of Vonnegut's black humour in which the reader is puzzled, not knowing whether to laugh at Vonnegut's description and use of words or to cry about the grotesque image and inhumane treatment of the Americans:

> "Nobody was *to let off* until the final destination. To *the guards*, *each car became a single organism* which *ate and drank and excreted* through its ventilators. In went *water and loaves of black bread and sausage and cheese*, and out came *shit and piss and language*. Human beings in there were excreting into steel helmets which were passed to the people at the ventilators, who dumped them. Billy was a dumper. When food came in, the human beings were *quiet and trusting and beautiful*. They shared" (p. 70).

The stylistic device that is pervasive in this excerpt and that brings an important contribution to its black humour is the polysyndeton, which is used four times: *ate and drank and excreted*; *water and*

loaves of bread and sausage and cheese; *shit and piss and language*; *quiet and trusting and beautiful*. One may easily notice that more things go in the box-car than go out of it. There is no account of the prisoners' emotions, so the logical assumption may be that the items that don't go out of the car are emotions of the people inside it. Other stylistic devices employed by Vonnegut are personification (*each car became a single organism*, which we assume is alive since we are told that it eats, excretes and talks) and fronting (Vonnegut stresses the noun *the guards* by using them in front position in the sentence in order to emphasize the perspective from which the fragment is written, i.e. of the guards). In this excerpt, too, Vonnegut combines trivial and "high" literature, the former becoming manifest by means of the nouns *piss* and *shit* and the latter by means of the verb *excreted*.

On the surface level, the language is concrete, to the point and it lacks any involvement from the part of the author. But, this surface detachment is misleading because the initiated reader can easily realise that the emotionless description is made from the perspective of the German guards. Nevertheless, on a deeper level, emotional involvement from the part of the author is apparent by the use of the polysyndeton, of personification, of the verb *to let off* (which seems like an encouragement from the part of the author) and of the highly expressive and almost poetic language.

The fragment ends in a positive and optimistic note, by the use of the polysyndeton made up of three adjectives having a positive connotation, *quiet and trusting and beautiful*, and of the verb *shared*. This makes its black humour lighter and easier to assimilate by the reader.

Thomas F. Marvin claims that:

> "Vonnegut's writing resembles telegraphic messages because all unnecessary words are left out. Short chapters are divided up into even shorter sections and placed side-by-side without the usual connections to lead readers from one to the next. This technique forces readers to make their own connections and highlights the subjective nature of reading a novel" [2].

Marguerite Alexander alludes to Vonnegut's fragmented style in the novel by claiming how the experience of Dresden has transformed his fictional mode:

> „The restraint of language implies that language itself lacks the resources to deal with such events. The omnipresent authorial voice – benign, decent, accepting, despairing – registers the response of hopeless and powerless humanity when confronted with such catastrophes" [3].

Patrick W. Shaw declares that:

> „Vonnegut's sight parody also encompasses the myth of poetic vision – a myth accepted and propagated by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman who announce that they possess all-seeing eyes that can gaze into the essence of nature's purpose. Vonnegut denigrates such romantic self-delusion. He realises that human insight is limited and offers at best a distorted view. The artist has no more perspicacity than the fool" [4].

To sum up, Kurt Vonnegut's well-known *Slaughterhouse-5* is not only a work of fiction which describes the absurdity of war, it may also be called an anti-novel as to its narrative technique. By means of his original and extremely inventive style, the traditional devices of chronology and causality lose their value, and the chaotic situation in war is reflected in a seemingly arbitrary collection of mental associations.

Notes

[1] K. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-5*, Dell, New York, 1991, p. 14.
[2] Th. F. Marvin, *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2002, p. 17.
[3] M. Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British American Fiction*, Edward Arnold, London, 1990, p. 56.
[4] P. W. Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, Troy, Whiston Press, New York, 2000, p. 107.

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