CHAPTER - IV
FANTASISING THE REAL: A STUDY OF KURT VONNEGUT JR.’S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

Under the postmodern condition “not only the self but also consciousness is discovered to be adrift, increasingly unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason, and is thus itself ‘decentred’…”¹ Vonnegut, Jr.’s Slaughterhouse-Five contextualizes the ‘decentred’ self through a nonlinear mode of narration, that in Klinkowitz’s words, created “a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text.”² There is nothing of the linear movement of the narrative, no intricate plot, crying for resolution. The protagonist, a time-traveller, can by a blink of his eye find himself in fire-bombed Dresden in 1944 and, by another blink, in Ilium, his home town in 1961. Billy Pilgrim was an eye-witness to the fire bombing by the Allies of Dresden during the fag-end of World War II. The experience proves so traumatic that Pilgrim becomes “unstuck in time.”³ Being “unstuck in time”, he does not find it worthwhile to distinguish between past, present and future, or, between the living and the dead.

Vonnegut’s fiction includes many artist figures who strive to bring order to experience by writing, painting, composing music. If the pessimistic side of Vonnegut leads him to bemoan the chaos of madness, war, and cosmic entropy, the other side causes him to celebrate and marvel at the persistence of the human spirit in the face of that disorder as it pursues and gives aesthetic pleasure. Vonnegut’s works suggest
that if man does not do something about the conditions and quality of human life on earth, no one and nothing else will. Fantasies of complete determinism, of being held helplessly in the amber of some eternally unexplained plot, justify complete passivity and a supine acceptance of the futility of all action. Given the overall impact of Vonnegut’s work we are bound to feel that there is at least something equivocal about Billy’s habit of fantasy, even if his attitude is the most sympathetic one in the book. At one point Vonnegut announces: “There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontation, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces.” It is certainly hard to celebrate the value of the individual self against the background of war, in which the nightmare of being the victim of uncontrollable forces becomes compellingly true. In such conditions it is difficult to be much of a constructive agent, and Billy Pilgrim doubtless has to dream to survive.

Vonnegut emphasizes on fantasy’s importance in trying to make sense of the senseless in his *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To him, fictions are responses to history and horror; ‘real’ horror forms one essential component of the book, while the process of the fantastic displaces the other. Vonnegut converts himself into Billy Pilgrim, a childlike, gentle-natured, but emotionally damaged optometrist from Illium, New York, who is none the less concerned, like his narrator, with the making of ‘corrective lenses’. In the ‘real’ world, Billy suffers the author’s experience of a POW imprisoned in the Dresden Slaughterhouse, and
survived by chance from the fireball which destroys the city. In the world of fantasy, Billy is displaced further, being kidnapped and taken to Tralfamadore – partly a pathological location, partly a place that opens the door of alternative knowledge, where time has been desynchronized, historical cause and effect interrupted. Hence, ‘The Charlotte Observer’ rightly comments about Vonnegut as “A medicine man, conjuring up fantasies to warn the world”.  

Vonnegut maps experiences of his own life in his works. He does not necessarily use specific events, instead uses the emotions he feels during those events in his life. He was isolated from the rest of society for a five month period of his life. From December 1944 to April 1945, Vonnegut was held captive by the Germans as a prisoner of war during World War II. He was captured during the Battle of the Bulge, and lived through the fire bombing of Dresden in February of 1945. During this time he was completely isolated from the rest of American society. In depicting this experience in his work, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. not only established himself as an author of literary merit, but pioneered with others, the genre of postmodernist fiction in America.

The similarity between Vonnegut and the characters in his works, who view themselves as being the only individuals, in the world, who are free thinking and have feelings. They often think only of themselves. The characters are intrinsically selfish, but the difference is that they honestly believe that no one else will be affected or at least know that
they have been affected. This is a common fantasy experienced by patients of Schizophrenia.

He includes a character from his home state of Indiana in every novel in order to make him an witness to his self-speak efforts. This character takes note of the author’s isolation and efforts at companionship, in the illusions of grandeur caused by Schizophrenia. In centralizing the concept of isolation, not alienation which implies withdrawal, the novelist brings the full force of isolation that is forced resulting in a state of paranoid illusiveness. The paranoid illusiveness of life becomes the *tour de force* of the narrative that becomes compellingly disruptive and interrogative.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade*, Vonnegut particularises the horrors of the World War II in the bombing of Dresden. The main character, Billy Pilgrim, is a very young infantry scout who is captured in the Battle of the Bulge and quartered in a Dresden Slaughterhouse where he and other prisoners are employed in the production of a vitamin supplement for pregnant women. During the February 13, 1945, Dresden was firebombed by Allied aircrafts, when the prisoners took shelter in an underground meat locker. When they emerged, the city had been levelled and they were forced to dig corpses out of the rubble. The story of Billy Pilgrim is the story of Kurt Vonnegut who was captured and survived the firestorm in which 135,000 German civilians perished, more than the number of deaths in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Robert Scholes
while summing up the theme of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the *New York Times Book Review*, maintains: ‘Be kind. Don’t hurt. Death is coming for all of us anyway, and it is better to be Lot’s wife looking back through salty eyes than the Deity that destroyed those cities of the plain in order to save them’. The reviewer concludes that ‘*Slaughterhouse-Five* is an extraordinary success. It is a book we need to read, and to reread’.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut’s most widely read novel and perhaps his best. Vonnegut has said, “I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn’t have to write at all any more if I didn’t want to. It was the end of some sort of career”. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with its non-linear time scheme interweaves in a complex arrangement science fiction, fantasy and the realities of World War II. The reason for this is that Vonnegut reveals himself in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as do Alexander Trocchi in *Cain’s Book* and Thomas Pynchon in *V*, to be “highly self-conscious of the novel as an abstract concept that examines a condition that never yields itself up completely as itself.” In other words, the novel functions to reveal new viewpoints in somewhat the same way that the theory of relativity broke through the concepts of absolute space and time. *Slaughterhouse-Five* thus gains its structure from Vonnegut’s essential aesthetic preoccupation – how to describe a reality that is beyond human imagination.

The method he chooses is outlined in the explanation given to Billy Pilgrim of the Tralfamadorean novel as he is being transported
toward that whimsical planet. His captors offer him the only book in English they had, Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, which is to be placed in a museum. The Tralfamadorians allow him to look at some of their novels, but warn that he cannot begin to understand them. The books are small; it would take a dozen of them to even approach *Valley of the Dolls* in bulk, and the language is impossible for Billy. But he can see that the novels consist of clumps of symbols with stars in between. Billy is told that the clumps function something like telegrams, with each clump containing a message about a situation or scene. But the clumps are not read sequentially as the chapters are in an earthling novel of the ordinary sort. They are read simultaneously. "There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages", the speaker says to Billy, "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. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time." 9

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is an approximation of this type of novel. Its chapters are divided into short sections (clumps), seldom more than a few paragraphs long. The time-tripping, both by Billy and the narrator, produces an effect like that achieved in the Tralfamadorian novel – to see many moments at once. The time-tripping also serves to eliminate suspense. (We know not only of Billy's assassination long before the novel ends, but also how the universe will end – the Tralfamadorians
blow it up experimenting with a new fuel for their flying saucers). And
the conclusion Vonnegut arrives at after examining the causes and
effects of Dresden is that there indeed is no moral, only the “Poo-tee-
weet” of the bird’s call that Billy hears when he discovers that the war in
Europe is over and he wanders out onto the shady streets of Springtime
Dresden.

What the Tralfamadorian structure does for Vonnegut is to enable
him to embody a new reality in his novel – at least new in contrast to the
sequential ups-and-downs reality of the traditional novel. Vonnegut’s
method accords well with the major changes in the conception of
physical reality that have come out of contemporary science. Jerry H.
Bryant writes in commenting on the relationship between twentieth
century Physics and recent fiction, “change, ambiguity, and subjectivity
(in a sense these are synonyms) thus become ways of defining human
reality. Novelist after novelist examines these features, and expresses
almost universal frustration at being deprived of the old stability of
metaphysical reality.”10 His Tralfamadorian scheme enables Vonnegut to
overcome the problems of change, ambiguity, and subjectivity involved
in objectifying the events surrounding the fire-bombing of Dresden and
the involvement of Billy Pilgrim in the event.

This is a difficult idea, but one way to understand it is to consider
the distinction Bertrand Russell makes in The ABC of Relativity between
the old view of matter (that it has a definite identity in Space and time)
and the new view (that it is an event). “An event does not persist and
move, like the traditional piece of matter”, Russell writes: “it merely exists for a little moment then ceases. A piece of matter will thus be resolved into a series of events .... The whole series of these events makes up the whole history of the particle, and the particle is regarded as being its history, not some metaphysical entity to which things happen”.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is no idealism – only shock and outrage over the havoc and destruction man is capable of wreaking in the name of what he calls a worthy cause. It is apt to discuss Vonnegut’s use of esthetic distance. John Keats coined the term “negative capability” to describe the ability of the artist (in his case, the poet) to free himself from the confines of his own personality and ego and to adopt the identity of the person or persons he is writing about. While an artist who is able to annihilate his own personality when writing a novel has Keats’s “negative capability”, such annihilation is surely not within Vonnegut’s capability in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim’s reaction to the fire-bombing of Dresden is crucial to an understanding of Pilgrim’s character. Because of the parallel in *Slaughterhouse-Five* between Vonnegut’s experience in Dresden and that of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut creates a mask, a narrator who provides a certain distance between author and protagonist. Vonnegut introduces a note of science fiction when he tells his readers that “Somebody was playing with the clocks.... The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could
do about it. As an Earthling I had to believe whatever clocks said — and calendars.” (S.F. 18).

This is just the paradoxical conception of Billy that Vonnegut develops. Billy at first seems to be merely an entity to which things happen — he is lost behind the lines during the Battle of the Bulge. He and Roland Weary are captured by the Germans. He survives the fire-bombing of Dresden, and marries. He is the sole survivor of a plane crash, he hallucinates that he is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians, he appears on crackpot talk-shows, and he is finally gunned down in Chicago. Through a constant movement of back and forth in time, we see Billy becoming his own history, existing all at once, as if he is an electron. This movement in time gives the novel a structure that is, to directly use the analogy, atomic. Billy whirls around the central fact of Dresden, the planes of his orbits constantly intersecting, and where he has been, he will be.

Of course, all of Vonnegut’s earlier central characters are somewhat like Billy in that they are seen as aspects of a protean reality. (Again, the name of Paul Proteus suggests how persistent this representation of personality is). But it is not until Slaughterhouse-Five that Vonnegut develops a way of fully representing the context of that reality.

The sudden changes that come over Malachi Constant, Eliot Rosewater, and others make them seem as illusive and problematic as
the absurd universe they occupy. By over simplifying his characters, Vonnegut does manage to suggest something of the complexity of human nature by indirection. But they still tend to linger in the mind as cartoon figures.

This is not the case with Billy Pilgrim. The Tralfamadorean structure through which his story is told (seem to be a better word) gives Billy dimension and substance and brings him eerily to life despite his pale ineffectuality. “Vonnegut’s reluctance to depict well-developed characters and to supply them with conventional motives for their actions serves as a conscious burlesque of the whole concept of realism in the novel”,13 points out Charles B. Harris in his study of the contemporary novel of the absurd. But with Slaughterhouse-Five, the conscious burlesque is diminished because Vonnegut has come up with a representation of Billy Pilgrim’s universe that is in itself a new concept of realism or reality.

Slaughterhouse-Five is thus as much a novel about writing novels as it is an account of Billy Pilgrim and Dresden. In relating the difficulty he had in dealing with Dresden, Vonnegut prefaces Slaughterhouse-Five with an account of his own pilgrimage through time as he attempts to write about his Dresden experience. The opening section consists of jumps back and forth in the author’s life – from his return to Dresden on a Guggenheim grant to his return home from the war two decades earlier from a conversation on the telephone with his old war buddy to the end of the war in a beet field on the Elbe outside of Halle, and then on to the
Chicago City News Bureau, Schenectady and General Electric, visiting O’Hare in Pennsylvania, teaching writing at the University of Iowa, and then Dresden and the Guggenheim trip once more.

The concern is always with the problem of writing the book – how to represent imaginatively things that are unimaginable. But in detailing his frustrations, Vonnegut conceptualizes his own life the way he later does Billy’s, in terms of Tralfamadorian time theory. The structure of the chapter about writing the novel consequently prefigures the structure of the novel itself.

Vonnegut states that he thought the book would be easy to write – all he would have to do is to simply report what he had seen. But this did not work. Too many other things get in the way. Why was Dresden, a supposedly safe city, bombed? Why did the American and British governments cover up the facts about the raid? What does the Dresden attack imply about American and British civilization? And, more important, why must Vonnegut’s life always lead up to and go back to what he saw when he emerged from the Slaughterhouse meat locker and looked at the moonscape of what was once perhaps the most beautiful city in Europe?

Vonnegut’s impulse is to begin Slaughterhouse-Five with his own experience, not with characters or ideas, but the ideas soon get in the way. Two structural possibilities come to mind. The first is suggested in
the song Vonnegut remembers as he thinks about how useless, yet how obsessive, the Dresden part of his memory has been:

My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin,
I work in a lumbermill there,
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, "What's your name?"
"My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin...."\(^{14}\)

When people ask him what he is working on, Vonnegut says that for years he has been telling them the same thing — a book about Dresden. Like Yon Yonson, he seems doomed to repeat the answer endlessly. But the maddening song suggests something else — the tendency many people (perhaps all) have to return to a central point in their lives in reply to the question of identity (“What is your name?”).\(^{15}\)

The song also crudely suggests the time theory that is later developed later in the novel with its emphasis on infinite repetition. But repetitions lead nowhere, especially in a novel, so Vonnegut considers another possibility. He takes a roll of wallpaper, and in the back of it tries to make an outline of the story using his daughter’s crayons (a different color for each of the characters). “And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line.” Vonnegut writes, “and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive
passed through it, came out the other side”.16 This is an outline for a Jamesian novel with an essentially linear time scheme. But it does not work as a representation of the experience Vonnegut is anxious to write about.

For one thing, characters do not actually come out the other side and inevitably go on from there. Like Vonnegut himself, and Yon Yonson, the characters compulsively return, moving back and forth on their lines. And as for the lines that stop, the beginning and middle of those lines are still there. Vonnegut thus comes up with a structure that includes both the Yon Yonson story and the wallpaper outline. It is as if he rolls the wallpaper into a tube so all the characters and incidents are closely layered, so they are in effect one unit, and the reader must look at them from the side. The tube then becomes a telescope through which the reader looks into the fourth dimension, or at least into another dimension of the novel. The story goes round and round yet it still leads somewhere, and yet the end is very close to the beginning. Vonnegut, in the guise of an oral story teller, asks us to “Listen”.17 Then, he introduces Billy and sets up the pattern that will be followed throughout the rest of the novel: “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.... He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.”18

Billy is anything but a thin character: he is another illustration of Vonnegut’s concept of Protean man. Billy needs to travel back and forth in time not only to understand himself but also to endure himself to
become his history. He is many personalities, many selves existing
together at once. He is a living Tralfamadorian "clump". One of the
surprises in the novel is the ridiculous personality of Billy as an
optometrist that turns out to be the most important symbolically.
Throughout the novel there is considerable emphasis on seeing things,
and there is a near continuous contrast between the way the world looks
to Billy and the way others see him. The change that comes over Billy is
mainly a result of the way he is forced to look at many things. Of all that
Billy is forced to look at, the most significant is what is revealed to him
by the Tralfamadorians. The flying saucer becomes an optometer that
measures the refractive errors in Billy’s outlook and the Tralfamadorians
are able to suggest a prescription. But it is Billy’s job as an optometrist
(S. F. 21) to help others see, and this is what he tries to do. At first, he is
not very effective. He is able to attend the Ilium school of optometry for
only one semester before he is drafted (and he is enrolled only in night
sessions at that). And after the war, despite all his success, Billy deals
less in vision than in fashion: “Frames are where the money is”. But
through his flying-saucer journey, he gains a new conception of what his
job should be – prescribing “corrective lenses for Earthling souls” so
that they can see into the fourth dimension as the Tralfamadorians do.

This development of Billy’s vision is handled in a deceptively
ambiguous way. The repetition of imagery together with the
juxtaposition of disparate events in Billy’s life suggests that his trip to
Tralfamadore is an hallucination and that the prescription he winds up
advocating is essentially the result of the associative powers of his mind. The substance of his trip to Tralfamadore may well be the consequence of reading a Kilgore Trout novel. The whole business of time travel and the simultaneous existence of events form out of the human illusions that Vonnegut has attacked in his earlier novels.

But the point for Billy is that the Tralfamadorians are real. The years of his life there is significant as he is going to live every moment of that life over and over again. In addition, there is the pragmatic value of his vision—it enables him to deal with the horror of Dresden and to get around the question of “why me?” that echoes through the novel. Are his lenses rose-colored or not perhaps depends on the reader’s own willingness to look into the fourth dimension with him. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at any rate, gives us a glimpse of what that dimension might be like, and shows us at the very least how it is possible to gain a sense of purpose in life by doing what Billy Pilgrim does while re-inventing himself and his universe.

The process of re-invention is made vivid by Vonnegut’s style with its hesitant short sentences and his tendency to return again and again to the same images. His abruptness works well in describing the time shifts Billy suddenly goes through, and it contributes a sense of Billy’s new vision, his re-invented universe, being formulated piece by piece. But the overall effect of the direct, often choppy, sentences and the brief paragraphs (several times consisting of only a few words) is to suggest the whirling of basic particles, of electrons that really cannot be
seen. What we think of when we think of the structure of the atom is not actually there at all—it is only a model, an illusion. And the same thing in principle is applicable to *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Billy Pilgrim’s erratic revolutions in time around Dresden. But as a model, it is, through its recapitulating imagery, its optometric symbolism, its positively charged sentences, and its telegraphic representations came alive in Tralfamadorian-atomic structure, one of the best solutions we have to the problem of describing the unimaginable.

Of course, no film could document the way Vonnegut confronted his own ambiguous nature in working out the story of Billy Pilgrim. The character who is developed the most fully in the novel is Vonnegut himself. This is why Vonnegut can get away with repeating the phrase, “So it goes”,23 after every tragic or pathetic incident. He has established himself, through his preface, as one of the characters in the book. His is a human voice, not just that of an omniscient narrator.

Vonnegut’s way of dealing with the subject matter of his choice results in a novel that is, by any standard, highly complex. It is a novel that works toward the resolution of Vonnegut’s own obsessions at the same time it works toward the resolution of several nervous questions concerning the viability of the genre itself. Like many of his contemporaries, Vonnegut accepts the idea of an absurd universe that is chaotic and without meaning. But unlike Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, he does not develop an anti-style, even though he seems to share their fear of the loss of distinctions between fact and fiction.
‘I would hate to tell you what this lousy, little book cost me in money and anxiety and time’. Vonnegut notes in the second page of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Far from being the lousy little book, the work turned out to be his first best seller, and catapulted him to sudden national fame, while bringing his works into serious intellectual esteem. He goes on to explain how he had brought its central experience, the firebombing of Dresden, back from the war, how he had thought it would be easy to write about, but was not; how his various experiments with its structure failed, and friends and associates cautioned him with their own interpretations of the war; how this always remained the essential story he had to tell, one he had continued as a writer to displace into the imagination and fantasy of his past books. It is a story that still demands indirection of method: ‘It is so short and jumbled and jangled’, he tells his publisher a few pages later, ‘because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.’ There is no way of reducing *Slaughterhouse-Five* to a simple plot. Vonnegut himself performs multiple roles both as creator and creature, author and character, taking centre stage at the beginning and conclusion and also appearing as a Dresden prisoner of war.

On the one hand, it is easy to view Vonnegut as the simplest of writers – one who offers his readers short sentences, short paragraphs, cartoonlike characters, and lots of jokes. On the other, it is also possible to describe him in the complex terminology of postmodern criticism – as a highly experimental metafictionalist, structural anthropologist, and a
player of intricate semiotic games. Vonnegut’s writing is “metafictional”25 because it often calls attention to its own artificiality so as to question the conventions of traditional narrative — much as an anthropologist implicitly critiquing his own culture when exploring another, or when a semiotician (literally, one who studies signs) uses language to explain how language works. Surprisingly, these contradictory images of Vonnegut as both simple and complex have coexisted instead of undercutting each other. Speaking in 1980 of Vonnegut’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Klinkowitz, wrote that “the academic argument ... that ‘experimental’ fiction had refined itself beyond the appreciation of popular readers is confounded at every turn by Vonnegut’s commercial success”.26 That Vonnegut is at once simple and complex, that he has appealed to both a popular and an academic audience, in itself suggests he is a writer worthy of attention.

His simplicity stems from his background in journalism, his common sense and lack of pretension, and his desire to reach a wide audience so as to present his concerns about pressing social realities. In an interview he distanced himself from the sort of writers for whom language itself is the primary concern: “I am not inclined to play Henry Jamesian games because they’ll exclude too many people from reading the book .... I have made my books easy to read, punctuated carefully, with lots of white space.”27

Yet underneath the simple surface of his work Vonnegut is certainly complex enough. His complexity stems from two sources: his
scientifically sophisticated view of the world and the innovative way he conveys that view through his fiction. Closer to a scientifically minded writer like Thomas Pynchon than to Henry James, Vonnegut creates 'science' fiction — even when his work has nothing to do with visitors from outer space. As James Lundquist puts it, in his novels Vonnegut strives "to reveal new viewpoints in somewhat the same way the theory of relativity broke through the concepts of absolute space and time".28

Vonnegut has been called a fabulist, a fantasist, an absurdist, a humorist, a black humorist, a broken humorist, a satirist, and, perhaps most often, a science fictionist — all of these designations are justifiable and therefore valid. Numerous critics have noticed that Vonnegut's protagonists are often engaged in reinventing reality to suit themselves. Critics of Slaughterhouse-Five have long recognized Billy Pilgrim's need to "create", albeit involuntarily, his Tralfamadorian experience. It can be said that it is the human imagination and the value of mental construct that makes self-renewal possible in the novel. So we can say that Tralfamadore is a fantasy. From the moment Billy comes "unstuck in time", he tries to construct for himself an Edenic experience out of materials he garners over the course of some twenty years. Therefore, Slaughterhouse-Five is a triumph of Vonnegut's imagination, where at last the author has found a way to emphasize benign constructions of the world, and forget about the bad.

Slaughterhouse-Five is not only a fabulation based on science fiction but is also a collage of factual reporting and fantasy writing as
well as a novel in which the conventional distance between the text and
the world is sought to be destroyed. Take for instance the last scene of
the novel: Billy is in a latrine in a German prison camp:

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. 29

Vonnegut says: "It seemed a categorical imperative that I write
about Dresden, the firebombing of Dresden, since it was the largest
massacre in the history of Europe and I am a person of European
extraction and I, a writer, had been present. I had to say something about
it". 30 But the problem was, as Vonnegut remarks in the novel itself,
"There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre". 31 Consequently,
he was frustrated in his early attempts to tell the single story he felt he
had to tell: "I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote
about it, and 'wrote about it', and WROTE ABOUT IT. ... The book is a
process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the
aftermath". 32 Precisely because the story was so hard to tell, and because
Vonnegut was willing to take the two decades necessary to tell it — to
speak the unspeakable — Slaughterhouse-Five is a great novel, a
masterpiece sure to remain a permanent part of American literature.
Slaughterhouse-Five is an attempt to describe a new mode of perception
that radically alters traditional conceptions of time and morality.
In Chapter I, Vonnegut discusses about his failed attempts at writing a traditional narrative about Dresden – one with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end. There are many reasons why such a traditional structure did not work for the novel Vonnegut wanted to write, but the principal one is that characters’ lives, like those of real people, do not themselves proceed in one direction: in reality one does as much “backward” travelling in time through memory as “forward” travelling in anticipation of the future. Thus while not identical with it, Slaughterhouse-Five’s narrative mode is allied with the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Joyce and Faulkner, which seeks to reproduce the mind’s simultaneous blending of the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation. Vonnegut’s own life, and Billy Pilgrim’s, are characterized by an obsessive return to the past. To get to the heart of the matter of Dresden, moreover, Vonnegut felt he had to let go of the writer’s usual bag of chronological tricks – suspense and confrontations and climaxes – and proceed by a different logic toward the future of the novel form.

Thus Vonnegut gives away what would be the traditional climax of his book – the execution of Billy’s friend Edgar Derby “for taking a teapot that wasn’t his” – in the beginning of the novel. Throughout the novel he intentionally deflates suspense by mentioning in advance the outcome of any conflict he creates. Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse-Five tries to construct a new form out of the fragments of old form. Like Christ, Billy brings a new message to the world, although it is a very
different one from his predecessor. And like Jesus he is an innocent who accepts his death, at the hands of an enemy who reviles and misunderstands him, as an opportunity to teach mankind the proper response to mortality. Both Billy and Jesus teach that one should face death calmly, because death is not the end. In the Christian vision the self after death proceeds forward in time eternally, either in heaven or hell; for Billy however, “after” death the soul proceeds backward, in time, back into life. As Billy learns from the Tralfamadorians:

When a person dies he only ‘appears’ to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at this funeral. All moments, past, present, and 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.34

Thus Billy, the new Christ, preaches that human beings ‘do’ have eternal life — even if there is no life after death.

Billy has now adopted the way of life of Tralfamadorians, the small green inhabitants of the planet Tralfamadore, who have abducted him there. In Tralfamadore everything is different from the way it is on earth, to the Tralfamadorians ‘All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist’.35 It is an illusion we have here
on Earth that one moment follows another one. Again, when a man dies, he only appears to die. Accordingly, Billy has seen his birth and death many times and pays random visits to all the events in between. Billy Pilgrim has encountered so much death and so much evidence of hostility and cruelty to the human individual during the war that he takes refuge in an intense fantasy life.

The literary consequence of the Tralfamadorian conception of time is the Tralfamadorian novel, which consists of "brief clumps of symbols read simultaneously." As the Tralfamadorians tell Billy, "these symbols, or messages, when seen all at once 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." Slaughterhouse-Five is of course itself an attempt to write this sort of a book, as Vonnegut announces in his subtitle: "This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore." Vonnegut leaves room for the idea that Billy's trip to Tralfamadore is all in Billy's mind. This sort of "escape hatch" from fantasy into realism is characteristic of the sci-fi genre. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy had been in a mental hospital and received shock treatments. During his stay there he had met Eliot Rosewater, who makes a cameo appearance from Vonnegut's previous novel in order to introduce Billy to the sci-fi works of Kilgore Trout.
Billy’s trip to Tralfamadore, finally, begins to look more like a metaphor than a literal description of events. His space travel is simply a way for him to describe the growth of his own imagination out of a Christian, linear vision of time to the cosmic perspective of time as the fourth dimension. This is not to say, however, that Vonnegut offers the Tralfamadorian ‘attitudes’ toward that vision as final truth. Tralfamadorians – “real” or imagined – are not human beings, so that their attitude of absolute indifference toward the terrors of the universe – even to the ultimate terror of its annihilation – could never work for humans.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is not a novel simply about Dresden. It is a novel about a novelist, who has been unable to erase the memory of his wartime experience and the Dresden fire-storm, even while he has been inventing stories and fantasies in his role as a writer since the end of the war. This book will be a mixture of facts and invention (“All this happened, more or less” – so the book starts), for Vonnegut has created a character called Billy Pilgrim, whose progress entails not only undergoing the wartime experiences which Vonnegut has invented. The result, among other things, is a moving meditation on the relationship between history and dreaming cast in an appropriately factual/fictional mode.

By critically examining the line of the story that Vonnegut tells, we can say that Billy Pilgrim is an innocent, sensitive man who encounters so much death and so much evidence of hostility to the
human individual while he was in the army that he takes refuge in an intense fantasy life, which involves his being captured and sent to a remote planet (while in fact he was being transported by the Germans as a prisoner of war). He also comes 'unstuck in time' through moments during the war that give way to an intense re-experiencing of moments from the past holding unexpected hallucinations of life in the future. Pilgrim ascribes this strange gift of being able to slip around in time to his experience on the planet which has given him an entirely new way of looking at time. We may take Vonnegut's word for it that the wartime scenes are factual, as near as can be attested by a suffering participant. The source of Pilgrim's dreams and fantasies is more complex. The planet that kidnaps him is Tralfamadore, a familiar reference from Vonnegut's second novel. At the same time it is suggested that the details of his voyage to Tralfamadore may well be based on details from his real experience subjected to fantastical metamorphosis. In his waking life Pilgrim is said to come from Ilium (Player Piano); he later encounters the American Nazi propagandist Howard Campbell (Mother Night); in a mental hospital where he has long talks with Eliot Rosewater, who introduces Pilgrim to the works of Kilgore Trout, both known faces from Vonnegut's last novel.

Science fiction, like postmodernist fiction, is governed by the ontological dominant. Indeed, it is perhaps the ontological genre par excellence. Science fiction, by staging "close encounters" between different worlds, placing them in confrontation, foregrounds their
respective structures and the disparities between them. How is one to place worlds into confrontation? How are these “close encounters” to be managed? The answer takes a variety of historically-determined forms within science-fiction writing. In general, as Darko Suvin and, following him. Mark Rose has both observed, we can distinguish two complementary strategies: the first is to transport (through space, time, or “other dimensions”) representatives of our world to a different world; the second, its inverse, involves (to use Pynchon’s phrase) “another world’s intrusion into this one.”

In the most typical (and stereotypical) science fiction contexts, “worlds” should be understood literally as planets, and “confrontation between worlds” as interplanetary travel. “Another world’s intrusion into this one”, in the interplanetary context, takes the form of invasion from outer space - whether malign, as in H. G. Wells’ classic War of the Worlds (1898), or benign, as in Arthur C. Clarke’s Childhood’s End (1953). The complementary topos, that of the earthling’s visit to an alien planet, occurs in a number of variants: the simplest, travel to a single other world (e.g. Well’s The First Men in the Moon, 1901, or Ray Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles, 1950); or “planet-hopping from world to world, as in pulp-magazine “space operas” or their cinematic equivalents, such as Star Trek and Star Wars; or travel across a planet on which disparate life forms, races, civilizations are juxtaposed, a multi-world world (e.g. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Martian Romances, or C.S. Lewis’s Out of the Silent Planet, 1938). The “zero degree” of the
interplanetary motif involves projecting a different planet without any provision for intrusion in either direction, by its inhabitants into our world or by earthlings into their world: worlds in collision without the collision. A classic example is Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), which constructs an integral, self-contained planetary world, nowhere explicitly related to our earth. Here the confrontation between the projected world and our empirical world is implicit, experienced by no representative character but reconstructed by the reader.

Many space-travel narratives, although by no means all of them, are projected into the future, for the obvious reason that they depend upon technologies which have been extrapolated from those of the present day. In other words, displacement in space is intimately bound up with displacement in time. They are, in fact, functionally equivalent: spatially distant other worlds may be brought into confrontation with our world, but so may temporally distant worlds, and with identical results of “cognitive estrangement”. Science fiction future worlds tend to gravitate either toward the Utopian pole (as in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, 1888) or, more frequently, toward the dystopian pole (as in Wells’s *When The Sleeper Wakes*, 1899, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* 1932, or George Orwell’s 1984, 1949). The mode of displacement from present to future falls into one or another of several categories; that of “future history”, which narrates more or less continuously the unfolding of “things to come” (e.g. Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men*, 1930, or Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy*, 1951-
3); or the “Sleeper Wakes” motif of Wells and Bellamy (and Woody Allen!), in which an inhabitant of our time hibernates through the intervening centuries and awakens in the world of the future; or the time-machine motif inaugurated by Wells’s novel *The Time Machine* (1895), and apparently not exhausted yet. As in the case of the interplanetary topos, there is also a “zero degree” of temporal displacement in which a future world is projected but without any inhabitant of our time visiting it, the confrontation between worlds being left to the reader to reconstruct.

Once we have accepted the pseudo-scientific premise of travel outside the three familiar dimensions of space, through the “fourth dimension” of time, there is nothing to prevent us from going on to imagine travel to worlds in dimensions beyond the fourth. Here the ontological confrontation occurs between our world and some other world or worlds somehow adjacent or parallel to our own, accessible across some kind of boundary or barrier. Just as Wells’ time-travel conceit seem to be inexhaustible so his contemporary Edwin Abbott’s conceit of interdimensional travel in *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884) continues to be exploited in science-fiction writing. The most intriguing variant of the other-dimension topos is the parallel or alternate world story based on historical speculation, the “what-if” premise so beloved of amateur historians — and of Borges. “He believed”, writes Borges of the imaginary author of the novel *The Garden of Forking Paths*. 
in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time - the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries - embraces every possibility.\footnote{42}

In history’s “garden of forking paths”, one fork will inevitably be chosen in preference to all the other forks that might have been chosen instead. But what if things had gone differently, what if one of the other forks had been chosen? What kind of world would have resulted if, for instance, the Axis Powers instead of the Allies had won the Second World War? This speculation generates the world of Philip K. Dick’s classic parallel-world story, \textit{The Man in the High Castle} (1962). Inevitably, such a story invites the reader to compare the real state of affairs in our world with the hypothetical state of affairs projected for the parallel world; implicitly it places our world and the parallel world in confrontation. And sometimes even explicitly: in Dick’s \textit{Man in the High Castle}, a science fiction writer in the parallel world publishes his own parallel world story based on the premise that the Axis had lost the Second World War. The parallel world of a parallel world is our world.

Most postmodernist futures, in other words, are grim dystopias – as indeed most science fiction worlds of the future have been in recent years. The motif of a world after the holocaust or some apocalyptic breakdown recurs. For instance, Angela Carter in \textit{The Passion of New Eve} (1977) and Sam Shephard in his play \textit{The Tooth of Crime} (1972) project similar visions of a future America that has disintegrated into an
anarchic landscape of warring private armies and desert marauders. Carlos Fuentes in *Terra nostra* (1975) imagines a world that has broken down under the pressure of the population explosion. Burroughs in *The Wild Boys* one that has regressed in the aftermath of the exhaustion of earth’s fossil-fuel reserves. In particular, the topos of nuclear holocaust and its aftermath recurs; examples include *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980), Maggie Gee’s *Dying, in Other Words* (1981), and, in a slightly displaced form, Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Out* (1964).

Dystopias or Utopias, postmodernist worlds of the future typically employ the “zero degree” of temporal displacement, projecting a future time but without making any particular provision for bridging the temporal gap between present and future; that bridge is left for the reader to build. There are a few exceptions however. For instance, the topos of “future history” occurs in *The Twofold Vibration*, where in the early chapters Federman rather breathlessly reviews twentieth century history and “premembers” future developments as far as New Year’s Eve, 1999. Temporal displacement through time-travel, like its spatial analogue, interplanetary flight, has been too closely identified with science fiction as such for postmodernist writers to be able to use it with much freedom. Only Burroughs, as might have been expected, makes much substantial use of it (in *The Soft Machine*, *The Wild Boys*, and especially *Cities of the Red Night*). Time-travel, for Burroughs, provides the fictional frame, the motivating alibi, for the slippages and segues
between one identity and another, one memory and another, one culture and another, which are staples of his writing. Time-travel also figures in Fuentes' *Terra nostra*. Here a late-twentieth-century Parisian travels back in time to Spain’s Siglo de Oro, while interlopers from past times invade and overwhelm Paris in the closing days of the twentieth century. This influx of time-travelers goes well beyond the simple confrontation of present and future, or past and present, of most time-travel stories, approaching the extreme conflation of all epochs in such science fiction texts as Farmer’s *Riverworld* tetralogy or Fritz Leiber’s *The Big Time*.

Prose fiction is a temporal medium. It takes time for the reader of a novel to absorb its worlds, assimilate its concepts, and perceive its various elements. Characters are developed, and plots unfold in time like a symphony a novel changes from one moment to the next, and the development of a given passage depends on other passages that have preceded it.

Novelists have often manipulated a story’s temporal unfolding by telling a tale out of chronological order, and in that way exploiting the tension among story, narrative, and the plot. Even in fictions characterized primarily by straightforward, continuous chronology, the time of reading is almost always at variance with the time the plot takes to unfold; almost all novels cover a longer period of time than the number of hours even a slow reader might take to finish the book.
In reading Billy Pilgrim's adventures we too become unstuck in time. From the Tralfamadorians he learns that all things from the beginning to the end of the universe exist in a sort of eternal present. They can look at time rather as one can scan a wide geographic panorama. Everything always 'is'. "There is no why". This being the case everything that happens is exactly what has to happen. The moment always exists; it is structured exactly as it has to be structured. A motto which Billy brings from his life into his fantasy, or vice versa, reads: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom always to tell the difference." But immediately afterwards he adds: "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." Billy becomes completely quiescent, calmly accepting everything that happens as happening exactly as it ought to (including his own death). He abandons the worried ethical, tragical point of view of Western man and adopts a serene conscienceless passivity. If anything, he views the world aesthetically: every moment is a marvellous moment, and at times he beams at scenes in the war. Yet he does have breakdowns and is prone to fits of irrational weeping.

Here is the crucial moral issue of the novel. Billy Pilgrim is a professional optometrist. He spends his life on earth prescribing corrective lenses for people suffering from defects of vision. It is entirely in keeping with his calling. When he has learned to see time in an entirely new Tralfamadorian way, he should try to correct the whole
erroneous Western view of time, and explain to everyone the meaninglessness of individual death. Like most of Vonnegut’s main characters he wants to communicate his new vision, and he does indeed manage to infiltrate into a radio programme to promulgate his message. He is, of course, regarded as mad. The point for us to ponder is, how are ‘we’ to regard his new vision? According to the Tralfamadorians, ordinary human vision is something so narrow and restricted that to convey them what it must be like they have to imagine a creature with a metal sphere round his head who looks down a long, thin pipe seeing only a tiny speck at the end. He cannot turn his head around and he is strapped to a flatcar on rails which goes in one direction. Billy Pilgrim’s attempt to free people from that metal sphere, and teach them his own widened and liberated vision that may thus seem entirely desirable. But is the cost of conscience and concern for the individual life equally desirable? With his new vision, Billy does not protest about the Vietnam war, nor shudder about the effects of the bombing. The Tralfamadorians of his dreams advise him to “concentrate on the happy moments of his life, and to ignore the unhappy ones – to stare only at pretty things as eternity failed to go by.” The Tralfamadorian response to life is “guilt-free”. At one point, Billy Pilgrim thinks of a marvellous epitaph which, Vonnegut adds, would do for him too. “Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt”.

Later in life when a man called Rumfoord is trying to justify the bombing of Dresden to him, Billy quietly reassures him. “It was all
right... 'Everything' is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore". Yet he still weeps quietly to himself from time to time. Is this a culpable moral indifference? In later life we see that Billy was simply unenthusiastic about living, while stoically enduring it, which may be a sign of the accidie which settles on a man with an atrophied conscience. From one point of view, it is important that man should still be capable of feeling guilt, and not fall into the sleep like Germany and Europe slept as eternity failed to go by in the thirties. Can one afford to ignore the ugly moments in life by concentrating on the happy ones? On the other hand, can one afford 'not' to? Perhaps the fact of the matter is that conscience simply cannot cope with events like the concentration camps and the Dresden air-raid, and the more general demonstration by the war of the utter valuelessness of human life. Even to try to begin to care adequately would lead to an instant and irrevocable collapse of consciousness. Billy Pilgrim, as Everyman, needs his fantasies to offset facts.

At one point, when he slips a bit in time he sees a war movie backwards. The planes have a magnetic power which shrinks the fires from the burning city and wraps them up in steel containers which are then lifted into the planes; the men on the ground have long tubes which suck the damaging fragments from wounded planes. It is a magic vision of restored wholeness — "everything and everybody as good as new" — and as such it is the best possible justification for wanting to escape from linear time so that events can be read in any direction, and the tragedy of
“before and after”51 transcendence. At the same time we are given some hints about the equivocal nature of Billy’s escapism. No one can bear sleeping near Billy during the war because he creates such a disturbance while he is dreaming. “Everybody told Billy to keep the hell away”.52 One man even blames his death on Billy. Later, in the prison hospital, the man watching over him reads The Red Badge of Courage while Billy enters a “morphine paradise”.53 In Cat’s Cradle the narrator admitted that there was little difference between a writer and a “drug salesman”,54 and while there is a kind of fiction which tries to awaken men to the horrors of reality (e.g. Crane’s book), it is clear to Vonnegut that there are fantasies, written or dreamed, which serve to drug men to reality. When the reality is the Dresden fire-storm, then arguably some drugging is essential.

Vonnegut’s view of things is essentially that of most modern scientists: that we live in an unimaginably vast cosmos which has existed for billions of years before life evolved on this planet and which will probably exist for billions of years after life is extinguished from here; that space and time themselves are relative, so that the human point of view alone makes people see the universe as they do; and that in particular the claims of various religions concerning God or the after life may serve a psychological function in human culture but are based on literally without any evidence whatsoever. In regard to his religious stance Vonnegut remarked that “my ancestors, who came to the United States a little before the civil war, were atheists. So I’m not rebelling
against organized religion. I never had any." Philosophically, Vonnegut comes closest to existentialists like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. As Peter J. Reed writes:

> No identifiable meaning or purpose to existence is presumed. The workings of the cosmos remain inscrutable. Where man comes from, why he is here, where he goes to, remain unanswerable. So man continues self-consciously alone, reluctant to accept the fact of his ‘being’ without knowing ‘why’, anxious to find reason, purpose, and order in the universe and in his relationship to it, but seeing instead only that things happen, unpredictably, pointlessly and often cruelly.

Quite simply, for Vonnegut the universe does not appear to have been designed as a home for human beings. This is the reason that propels him to fantasize the real in his novels.

In his study, *The Exploded Form*, James Mellard argues that after writers began to incorporate the new understanding of Darwin into their fiction, the underlying notion for the nineteenth century novel became ‘evolution’. The underlying notion of the modern novel, however, has shifted to the idea of ‘explosion’, as writers have turned to the big bang theory of the creation of the universe. While the nineteenth century novel typically “fostered growth, attachment, assimilation and integration”, Mellard writes, the modern novel “presents decay, detachment, alienation, disintegration.” Mellard lists John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, William Gass, and Vonnegut as the principal postmodern creators of the “exploded” novel.
form. In his 1980 study, Mellard was describing Vonnegut’s metafictional novels of the 1960s and 70s; but he accurately predicted the change in Vonnegut’s work in the 1980s when he suggested that the mode of fiction after writers had exhausted the literature of “explosion” in which traditional plotting, characterization, and thematic coherence were often abandoned - would “probably be a new realism”. In fact, Vonnegut’s career can be divided into three major phases: Science fiction, metafiction, and “neorealism”. All three are his attempts to map the anxiety of our age in a world of paradigm shifts.

But there are compensations for the anxiety of being human in Vonnegut’s fiction. As Giannone observes, “out of a sense of helplessness before cosmic anarchy, Vonnegut turns to the formative power of art to restore himself”. As Vonnegut himself confesses, “Most of my adult life has been spent bringing some kind of order to sheets of papers eight and a half inches wide and eleven inches long. This severely limited activity has allowed me to ignore many a storm”. Beside artist figures Vonnegut’s fiction is filled with other recurrent character types that reflect his thematic preoccupations.

In all the novels one finds unenlightened “straights” - naïve believers in the sanctity of their company, their country, their religion. While Vonnegut usually shows a great deal of sympathy for such characters, he always overturns their settled view of things by introducing a character from outside their situation who offers an anthropological critique of their beliefs. In the most extreme form, this
character is a visitor from outer space, like the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. At other times, he is simply from another culture, or from another state of mind because of his experiences in extreme situations like madness or war. As he said in an interview, “It’s a tremendous advantage to be at the edge ..., because you can make a better commentary than someone at the centre would”. The essence of that commentary is the understanding that systems of human belief always refer more to themselves than to the actual state of things in the cosmos. Beginning with his 1966 preface to *Mother Night*, Vonnegut has become more and more autobiographical with each novel. In a series of prologues to his recent fiction he has been explicitly so, drawing direct parallels between his fiction and his life.

At the end of the novel, spring has come to the ruins of Dresden, and when Billy is released from prison the trees are in leaf. He finds himself in a street which is deserted except for one wagon. “The wagon was green and coffin-shaped”. That composite image of regeneration and death summarizes all there is actually to be seen in the external world, as far as Vonnegut is concerned. The rest is fantasy. Cat’s cradle, lies. In this masterly novel, Vonnegut has put together both his war novel and reminders of the fantasies which made up his previous novels.

The facts or realities which defy explanation are brought into the same frame with fictions beyond verification. The point at which fact and fiction intersect is Vonnegut himself, the experiencing, dreaming man who wrote the book. He is a lying messenger, but he acts on the
assumption that the telegrams must continue to be sent. Eliot Rosewater's cry to his psychiatrist, overheard by Billy Pilgrim, applies more particularly to the artist: "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful 'new' lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living." Of course, they must also tell the truth, whatever that may be. Kafka's couriers could hardly be more confused. What Vonnegut has done, particularly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is to define with clarity and economy — and compassion — the nature and composition of that confusion.

The most significant feature of postmodernism evident in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is intertextuality, i.e. reference to an unusually large number of other texts. They range from fiction (Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, and the fictitious Kilgore Trout's *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*) to documentary works (*The Bombing of Dresden, The Execution of Private Slovik, Extraordinary Delusion and the Madness of Crows*) to criticism. The deliberate proliferation of texts within the main text — intertextuality — is another device whereby the authenticity of the text, the New Critic's mode of viewing the text as sacrosanct, is sought to be undermined.

An interviewer asks Vonnegut, "Let's talk about the women in your books." To this the author replies, "There aren't any. No real women, no love". He further says: "I try to keep deep love out of my stories, because, once that particular subject comes up, it is almost impossible to talk about anything else. Reader's don't want to hear about
anything else. They go gaga about love. If a lover in a story wins his true love, that’s the end of the tale, even if World War III is about to begin, and the sky is black with flying saucers”. He keeps away the subject of love from his story so that the story could go on and on and on. Regarding the plot, he says: “I guarantee you that no modern story scheme, even plotlessness, will give a reader genuine satisfaction, unless one of those old-fashioned plots is smuggled in somewhere. I don’t praise plots as accurate representations of life, but as ways to keep readers reading. When I used to teach creative writing, I would tell the students to make their characters want something right away – even if it’s only a glass of water. Characters paralysed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time. One of my students, wrote a story about a nun who got a piece of dental floss stuck between her lower left molars, and who couldn’t get it out all day long. I thought that was wonderful. The story dealt with issues a lot more important than dental floss, but what kept readers going was anxiety about when the dental floss would finally be removed. Nobody could read that story without fishing around in his mouth with a finger. Now, there’s an admirable practical joke for you. When you exclude plot, when you exclude anyone’s wanting anything, you exclude the reader, which is mean-spirited thing to do. You can also exclude the reader by not telling him immediately where the story is taking place, and who the people are. And you can put him to sleep by never having characters confront each other. Students like to say that they stage no confrontations because people avoid confrontations in modern life.
'Modern life is so lonely', they say. This is laziness. It's the writer's job to stage confrontations, so the characters will say surprising and revealing things, and educate and entertain us all. If a writer can't or won't do that, he should withdraw from the trade.\textsuperscript{64}

In 'staging confrontations', as Vonnegut implies, a postmodern writer contextualizes both readerly and writerly anxieties, in that the writer gets hold of a piece of fact only to render it strange, fantastic.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

6. Resourced from the Internet: Web Page on the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
32. *CKV*, p. 163.
33. *SF.*, p. 4.
43. *SF.*, p. 66.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 64
52. *Ibid.*, p. 68


60. *CKV*, p. 299.


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