



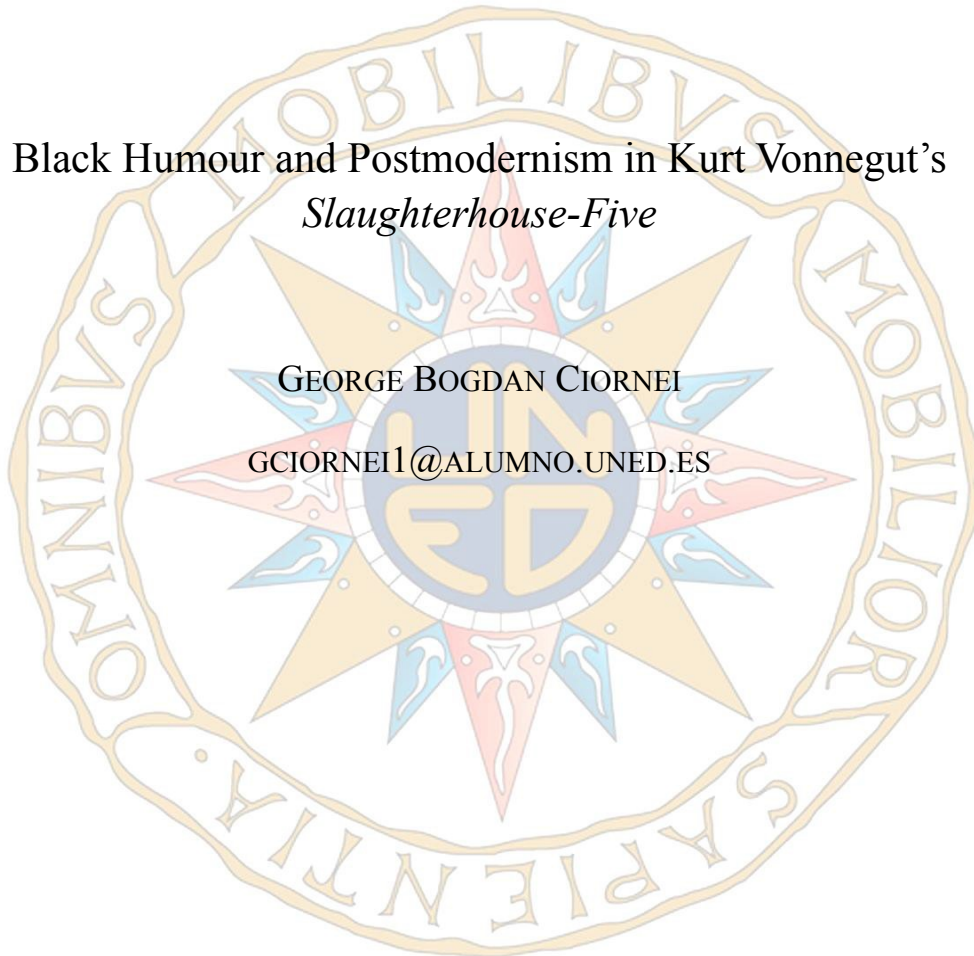
TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

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Black Humour and Postmodernism in Kurt Vonnegut's
Slaughterhouse-Five

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Abstract

This paper's aim is to analyse the use of black humour in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. Its leading points of focus are finding a working definition for the concept of black humour, exploring how this notion applies to Vonnegut's novel and uncovering the motivations that can account for its use. The main objective is to determine if black humour can be considered a characteristic of postmodern fiction, by using *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a case study.

Keywords: *black humour, postmodernism, Kurt Vonnegut, US literature.*

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Kurt Vonnegut's lessons for humour: Introduction

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) is a novel of considerable complexity. The peculiarity of its structure, language, themes, images and situations lends itself to numerous and often contradictory interpretations. One of the aspects that figures prominently among the interests of literary criticism is the use of black humour in the novel, a topic which will also be the object of concern of this paper.

Despite being widely discussed, the subject of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is far from being exhausted and there is still ample room for debate around it. Among the questions most likely still left unanswered are: What exactly is black humour and how is it different from other types of humour? Can *Slaughterhouse-Five* be labelled a "black humour" novel? Is there such a thing as a "black humour literary movement" and is Vonnegut part of it? What purpose is served by the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

A possible explanation for all these questions still waiting for a definitive answer is given by the fact that the term "black humour" itself is an ambiguous one. Like many other notions, "black humour" may appear intuitively easy to define, but when actually attempting it, one realises that it is very difficult to provide a definition that reflects the initial intuition. The greatest difficulty lies determining what exactly is the "black" in "black humour," as it can be associated with many different things, ranging from absurdity, cynicism, irony, sarcasm, morbidity, parody and many others. Further complications arise when considering the reach of the term, as in vacillating between black humour understood as an attitude of mind or mode of expression and black humour as a distinct literary genre or movement.

However, for the purpose of analysing black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, rather than continuing to dissect the term, it is preferable to use a working definition, i.e. settle for one viewpoint or set of characteristics and begin the analysis from there. A suitable starting point is the simple definition offered by *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, which defines "black comedy" as a kind of text "in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to

offend and shock” (27-28). Notably, the author gives *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an example of black humour: “A similar black humour is strongly evident in modern American fiction from Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934) to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).”

Other similarly simple definitions of black humour can be found in critics who have studied Vonnegut's work. For Jerome Klinkowitz, an author who has dedicated many articles and books to Vonnegut, black humour is “an accommodation by laughter to the world's insanity” (*A Final Word* 2). Another example is provided by Max F. Schulz, one of the first (and relatively few) scholars who dedicated an entire volume to the study of black humour fiction. His book, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973), was published only a few years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For Schulz, black humorists are characterised by seeking “rather a comic perspective on both tragic fact and moralistic certitude” (13).

This initial disambiguation of such a vague term is a necessary first step in approaching an analysis of the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The present study will focus on searching for answers to two main questions: *how* is black humour present in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *why* is it used.

Addressing the first question will involve a close reading of the primary text, identifying different aspects that can be linked to black humour. The viewpoints will vary, ranging from granular details such as the use of language or particular images and situations, to broader perspectives, like the analysis of the novel's subject matter, narrative techniques, main themes and characters.

The second question will focus on finding the motivations behind the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Here, I will advance a hypothesis, namely that black humour in American fiction is intimately related to postmodernism. It will be assumed that the purpose and effects of the use of black humour in the novel can be connected to what is generally accepted as postmodernism characteristics. Thus, the general objective of this work will be to determine, through the analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whether black humour can be considered a characteristic of postmodernism.

The association between postmodernism and black humour is not an incidental one. Both terms began to be used around the 1960s, in a postwar

world marked by disillusionment and exhaustion. Literature, as well as society, reached then a turning point and postmodern fiction emerged as the result of the search for new forms that were able to reflect the increasing awareness of a world dominated by randomness and absurdity.

In this context, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published in 1969. Its central event is the firebombing of Dresden during World War II, which Vonnegut experienced as a prisoner of war. With the use of unconventional narrative techniques, the novel focuses on the author's struggles to reconstruct and come to terms with the unspeakable event. Vonnegut's innovative approach leads to the creation of Billy Pilgrim, a fictional character who shares the Dresden experience with the author and becomes the novel's protagonist.

The novel became a success and received much critical attention. It has often been analysed as a prototypical postmodern novel, seen how it presents several of the characteristics usually associated with postmodernism: fragmentariness, use of metafiction, interrogation of reality and subversion of traditional values associated with coherence, meaning or ontological categories.

At the same time, any analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as a postmodern work or from other perspectives, cannot overlook the use of humour, and, more specifically, the use of black humour which is extensive throughout the novel. Thus, it seems valid to interrogate if black humour can be seen as a consequence or a manifestation of postmodernism.

A first step in addressing this hypothesis is to draw some conclusions from previous studies on the matter and assess their relevance. Despite being a vague notion, the topic of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been covered extensively by literary criticism.

Max F. Schulz, for instance, warned against the daunting enterprise of trying to define a term like black humour, stressing that its many acceptations feel like "a series of uncoordinated attacks on different flanks" (3). However, he gradually draws near a stable definition by making a series of very useful distinctions between black humour and similar concepts such as traditional comedy and satire, the theatre of the absurd, surrealism, existentialism or the grotesque. In his view, the black humorist emerges as a sceptical persona, unconcerned with moral victories or the reconciliation between individual and

society, but rather “absorbed by the possibilities of playful and artful construction” (5-13).

Schulz also aimed to determine if black humour could be seen as distinct literary movement, concluding that indeed, black humour fiction was a phenomenon of the 1960s, “comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of nuclear-technological world intrinsically without confinement” (5). Vonnegut is included in this group, and Schulz claims that his novels are characterised by a distinct form of black humour, readily identifiable in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: “In Vonnegut’s novels the joke on man is that he may comb through all the debris of this world and still not learn towards what end his life has moved” (27). In other words, black humour in Vonnegut’s fiction arises from the realisation of the total lack of certainties and limitless multiplicity of experience.

An important conclusion after analysing Schulz’s book is that many of the characteristics he attributes to black humour in fact overlap with tenets of postmodernism. One example is the black humorist’s loss of faith in a meaningful reality, which is mentioned in several chapters. Further examples refer to the parody of different value systems or the pluralistic views applied to all levels of human experience. All these assumptions can be included in a broad definition of postmodernism.

Surprisingly, Vonnegut himself rejected the black humorist label. When asked about it, he quickly disapproved and dismissed the label as “useless except for merchandisers.” Nevertheless, Vonnegut made frequent remarks about the use of humour in his fiction. He described himself as an author “in the business of making jokes,” and his novels as “mosaics made up of a whole bunch of tiny little chips; and each chip is a joke” (qtd. in Davis 241-249). Furthermore, he had his own vision of black humour, defining it as the struggle of “intelligent people in hopeless situations” (qtd. in Davis 241-249).

Jerome Klinkowitz is one of the authors who has studied Kurt Vonnegut in depth, and dedicated full volumes to the analysis of his works. References to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, black humour and postmodern fiction can be found across many of his publications. In one of his journal articles, for instance, he talks about “Kurt Vonnegut’s lessons for humor,” concluding that “getting a

chuckle out of death, however sardonic, is a trademark of this author's work" ("Die Laughing" 15). He also quotes Vonnegut on many occasions, being very helpful in constructing an image of Vonnegut as an author. Of particular interest are the quotes about humour. In the same article, Klinkowitz reproduces Vonnegut's words referring to laughter and tears. Vonnegut states that he prefers laughter, "since there is less cleaning to do afterwards" ("How to Die Laughing" 15).

From reviewing Klinkowitz's work I have drawn the conclusion that black humour is undoubtedly present in Vonnegut's fiction, and that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is among the best examples of it. In his book *The Vonnegut Effect*, Klinkowitz dedicates an entire chapter to the analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and makes some very interesting points about the author's technique, the relationship between history and fiction, the relevance of the first chapter and Billy Pilgrim as a character. Regarding black humour, Klinkowitz describes how it is used as a vehicle for breaking numerous conventions associated with aspects like the relationship between author and his fiction or the linearity and absoluteness of time. He refers to Vonnegut's "way of making matter humorous" as opening "a crack in the confinements of convention," ultimately providing a comic relief to unsolvable matters such as warfare or death (94). I consider this a valid point for my hypothesis regarding black humour and postmodernism, since the breaking of conventions, along with questioning values and systems of representations are also typically associated with postmodernism.

Black humour and postmodernism are also among the chief concerns of Kathryn Hume, another critic who has dedicated many pages to the analysis of Vonnegut's works. In her vision, black humour is an expression of a satiric spirit in contemporary fiction, which she terms "diffused satire" — a kind of satire "differentiated by its lower emotional intensity, so low at times that the target may be difficult to determine" ("Diffused Satire" 302). This lower intensity is found in Vonnegut, who for Hume qualifies as a humorist, but not one to turn to for belly laughs: "if you want a cheery laugh, you can do better elsewhere" ("Melancholy" 221). Regarding *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Hume qualifies it as a milestone for Vonnegut, as it seems to reunite all of his trademarks as an author. Humour is considered one of them, and Hume even goes as far as

claiming that it is the reason for Vonnegut's popularity, since it provides the means for accepting failure in individuals and society and for avoiding an irreversible descent into bitter depression.

There has been a revived interest in Vonnegut's black humour in recent literary criticism. The journal *Studies in American Humor* published a series of essays in 2012, devoting ample space to the analysis of Vonnegut's humour from several different perspectives. Peter C. Kunze, the editor, considers that the role of humour in Vonnegut's work is a vital one. He mentions that Vonnegut is "sometimes thought of as black humorist," because of the bittersweet quality of his humour, more likely to provoke "knowing smiles or grim chuckles" rather than "belly-laughs" (Kunze and Tally 7).

A review of the previous approaches on the topic represented an indispensable step in the process of elaborating this current thesis. The study of the books and articles mentioned above, along with many others, led me to the conclusion that black humour, regardless of its interpretations, has often been associated with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and that there is little disagreement about it being a feature of Vonnegut's writing.

In contrast, determining whether black humour is a characteristic of postmodernism is a far more complex question to which the answer might still be an open one. However, as far as *Slaughterhouse-Five* is concerned, the object of my analysis will be to show that, in one form or another, the use of black humour is indeed related to postmodernism. My methodology will therefore rely on using *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a case study in order to seek a confirmation for this hypothesis.

The following sections will discuss black humour from several different angles, aiming to cover as many relevant aspects of the novel as possible. Initially, the focus will be on the use of black humour as an overall approach to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, considering its main theme, the firebombing of Dresden. The next section will look at specific instances of black humour throughout the novel, narrowing the scope of the analysis. A third section will be dedicated to the Tralfamadore subplot, as a distinguishing element of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Its contribution to the black humour effect will be discussed, as well as its deeper meaning related to the novel's message. The fourth and final section will

address the character of Billy Pilgrim and his role in the novel. These sections will be followed by a conclusion that will summarise my findings and assess the validity of my hypothesis.

”Getting a chuckle out of death”: What Vonnegut made of the firebombing of Dresden

I would like to begin this section by recalling the definition of black humour mentioned in the introduction. There, black humour was understood as a text wherein “disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to offend and shock.”

An initial approach to *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals, even from the first page, that the novel is a perfect illustration of this definition. Upon opening the book, the readers are greeted with the following two lines: “All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (1). The “bitter amusement” is suggested by the playfulness of “all this happened, more or less,” while “the disturbing subject” fits perfectly with the “the war parts.”

By beginning the novel in this manner, Vonnegut achieves three things. First, he advances that his approach to the text will be an unconventional one, if not offensive or shocking, at least original or surprising. Most importantly, it is a comical way of beginning a book, and sets the tone for what the readers might expect for the rest of the novel. Secondly, he introduces the novel’s topic in the second line — the readers already know that there will be “war parts.” And lastly, Vonnegut challenges the traditional suspension of disbelief by saying that the war parts are true and introducing himself as a real person who took part in the event. Readers, thus, experience Vonnegut’s humour from the first contact with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and realise that it used to flout their expectations regarding conventional fiction.

Vonnegut’s light-hearted and humorous tone is certainly not the expected one when dealing with such a grave topic as the largest massacre in military history. The firebombing of Dresden in World War II is the central event in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and also the most important one in Vonnegut’s life. He

experienced it first-hand as a prisoner of war held in the city, and was one of the few survivors because he was located in an underground meat locker. The bombing destroyed the city's central area in its entirety and the estimated casualties were around 135 000, more than the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that occurred later that year.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut tries to structure this dreadful event into words, but concludes that the task is next to impossible. Black humour plays an important role as a vehicle for representing this struggle. Its use is nowhere more evident than in Chapter One, which functions as a preface for the rest of the novel. Here, black humour takes the form of ironic, sarcastic and self-deprecating comments about the Dresden narrative, underlining the idea of words failing to reflect experience.

For example, Vonnegut qualifies the result of his twenty-year effort to write about Dresden as a "lousy little book" (2), "short and jumbled and jangled" (19), and ultimately a "failure" (22). He also describes himself as "an old fart" (2) or "trafficker of climaxes and thrills" (5). These words are impactful and surprising, but readers do not need to search for an explanation for them, since Vonnegut offers it himself: "because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). This comment becomes the book's guiding principle and can account for many of its innovations in structure, style and narrative viewpoint.

The use of these humorous remarks can be understood as part of what Jerome Klinkowitz calls "the Vonnegut effect," summarised as "turning the great and famous into the comfortably familiar and ordinary" (*Effect* 89). Having established that there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre, the author resorts to talking about himself, making readers understand the difficulty writing a story about Dresden. His approachable, inviting personality becomes "instrumental in getting the difficult matter of Dresden expressed" (*Effect* 90), helping readers make their way through the story of a massacre. In my view, "the Vonnegut effect," at least, in this case, is the equivalent of a black humour effect, created by the disarming contrast between the seriousness of a topic like the Dresden massacre and the familiarity, simplicity and candidness with which Vonnegut describes his attempts of writing a book about it.

As an author “in the business of making jokes,” Vonnegut’s trade does not stop short at purely language-based jokes like the ones mentioned above. *Slaughterhouse-Five* also offers more elaborate and subtle examples of black humour, perceived by the readers as they advance through the novel. For example, a “trick” performed by Vonnegut consists of repeatedly lamenting the difficulty of writing about Dresden, but, in the process, he actually delivers the text he said it was impossible to write (Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 26). The unanswerable question is in fact answered, and the result is a radically unconventional novel.

Another instance of playing with the readers’ expectations is the fact that, although the subject of Dresden permeates every aspect of the novel, any description of the actual firebombing is notoriously absent from it. According to Klinkowitz, this is justifiable, since attempting to put the experience into words would mean diminishing its immensity (*Reforming* 45). What the author suggests by this omission is that reality is simply too unspeakable to be reduced to the conventional limits of language.

A similar sensation of having been tricked is experienced with the novel’s supposed climax. Announced from the first chapter as being “the execution of poor Edgar Derby” (4-5), when the novel reaches this moment, it is glossed over like an insignificant detail. But the irony is there, nevertheless: hundreds of thousands of people were killed in the bombing, and one of the few survivors is randomly executed for stealing a teapot.

These examples illustrate how the bitter amusement of black humour can transpire in more subtle ways. They are consistent with what Klinkowitz identified as the trademark of Vonnegut’s oeuvre: “getting a chuckle out of death, however sardonic” (Klinkowitz, *Die Laughing* 15). The most obvious manifestation of this attitude is contained in the phrase “So it goes,” repeated almost obsessively over a hundred times in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Its endless repetition, uttered after every death in the narrative, becomes the book’s grim refrain. It is the best example of the “discrepancy between the novel’s narrative tone and the gravity of its content” (Wepler 107). Behind this simple shrug of the shoulders lies the grim realisation that death is so omnipresent and

overpowering that there is little else to do other than simply acknowledge it (Klinkowitz, "Die Laughing" 15).

But this simple phrase achieves much more than transmitting an attitude in face of death. Its ubiquity is used as a vehicle for linking different elements in the book: Vonnegut-as-author in the first chapter, with Billy Pilgrim's adventures in the rest of the novel, and the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life which seems to inspire both of them. Its deceptive simplicity is a reflection of black humour's "comic perspective on both tragic fact and moralistic certitude." And, of course, it is yet another trick played by Vonnegut. When the readers reach Chapter 4 and read "The champagne was dead. So it goes." (73), they can do nothing else than chuckle along. This is Vonnegut at his finest.

So far, the analysis has centred on identifying the use of black humour in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five's* main theme, the Dresden massacre and the death and destruction associated with it. Addressing the hypothesis advanced in the introduction also requires an analysis of the motives behind a black humour approach, assessing the ways in which they can be related to postmodernism. As it happens with black humour, the term "postmodernism" is also a notoriously ambiguous one. In order to avoid unnecessary divagation, I will refer to its most commonly accepted characteristics as they are summarised in Tim Woods's volume *Beginning Postmodernism* (1999).

One such characteristic concerns the relationship between fiction and history, more specifically, the demythologisation of history. Postmodern fiction systematically rejected the conception of history as a "set of innocent facts and deeds" (Woods 54) and expressed distrust in its objectivity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, black humour plays a deciding role in interrogating and overturning grand historical narratives like the firebombing of Dresden would aspire to be. By choosing to not describe the actual firebombing, Vonnegut rejects the pretensions of a totalising and objective view of the historical event. Instead, he favours a micronarrative of his own struggle to understand and make peace with the event. Likewise, the comical incongruity between the speaker's tone and the gravity of the topic, discussed earlier, implies a subjective, personal view of history that is part of the interrogative nature of postmodern fiction.

Black humour is similarly successful in making evident another postmodern assumption in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In this case, it refers to narrative reflexivity, defined as the “self-conscious incorporation of the processes of production, construction or composition” (Woods 5), or in other words, fiction concerned with its own status as fiction. This is in fact an accurate description of Chapter One, wherein the author relates the process of assembling the book, becoming “in effect the first critical commentary on the succeeding parts of the novel” (Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 10). Amusing remarks like “short and jumbled and jangled” or “this one is a failure” draw attention to Vonnegut’s difficult task of putting the story together and elicit the readers’ sympathy, suggesting that humour is the only way of making the novel’s subject more bearable. Vonnegut’s inviting presence that guides the reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an example of masterful use of self-conscious reflexivity, with black humour being a key instrument in its creation.

Some critics, like Susan Sontag or Ihab Hassan, have defined postmodern fiction as a literature of silence (Woods 52). For them, silence in this context means “the disruption of all links between language and reality” (Woods 52). These links are a reminiscence of literary realism, which assumes that language is able to reflect reality. The rejection of this assumption, as part of the postmodern commitment of breaking away with realism, is yet another tenet that is connected with the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The inadequacy and limitations of words and language are not simply implied in the novel, they are actually stated: the author introduces the topic of his book as the firebombing of Dresden, only to declare shortly after that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” Here, the sharp edge of black humour is what helps put forward this particular postmodern belief.

The previous examples prove that, to a certain extent, black humour resonates with several different postmodern characteristics, serving as a more than adequate vehicle of expression for these. The next section will seek further connections within *Slaughterhouse-Five*, focusing on details from the main narrative.

“Laughs are exactly as honourable as tears”: Sources of humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

When asked about why he considered his fiction appealing to the public, Vonnegut answered simply: “Well, I’m screamingly funny, you know, I really am in the books. I think so. And that helps because I’m funnier than a lot of people” (Klinkowitz and Somer 21-22).

Indeed, Vonnegut’s sense of humour is perhaps the most striking and defining quality found in the greatest part of his novels and stories. His peculiar personality, vision and style, all touched by humour, have managed to “craft for his readers and exceedingly mad world” (Klinkowitz and Somer 157). This fictional mad world, with different versions in *Cat’s Cradle*, *Mother Night* or *Player Piano*, appears as a reaction to the madness and hopelessness of reality. Klinkowitz’s definition of black humour accurately captures this state of mind. In his view, black humour is “an accommodation by laughter to the world’s insanity” (*A Final Word 2*).

Slaughterhouse-Five’s essence can be seen as one of continuous accommodation, given its hundreds of moments of laughter. This section will look at some of them, aiming to show the presence of black humour in the details related to the novel’s language, images and situations.

Chapters 2-9 comprise the novel’s main plot and can be read as a work of fiction. The author begins just as he announced in the first chapter, by introducing Billy Pilgrim, a fictional character who, like him, experienced the firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war. The main narrative subsequently follows the adventures and misadventures of Billy Pilgrim before, during and after the war. But these are told in random order, due to Billy’s condition of being “unstuck in time” (23), which pushes him back and forth between different moments of his life. The most outstanding element in the story is Billy’s abduction by aliens, who take him back to their planet Tralfamadore and hold him captive in a zoo for their entertainment.

Vonnegut’s language-based humour is found in many instances from the main narrative. Overall, the language in this part is characterised by short, juxtaposed, grammatically simple sentences of the type “Billy is...,” “Billy has

become...,” etc. The use of such language is in tone with Billy’s character, depicted as an unassuming, innocent person who seems to not understand too much of what happens around him; and out of tone with the depth and sobriety required by the subject matter of war, death and destruction. By relying on Billy’s viewpoint and his childlike naivety, Vonnegut moves away from any stereotypically heroic or romanticised depictions of war, in effect keeping his promise made to Mary O’Hare of not including any playable parts for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne in his novel.

Looking more in-depth, perhaps the best example of comic use of language in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the abundance of funny-sounding words like “flibbertigibbet” (29), “golliwogs” (156-157) or “frumpish” (100). They significantly appear mostly in moments of tension in the narrative, making the words that describe a situation seem more important than the situation itself (Wepler 104). For instance, when depicting German trains carrying prisoners of war to the different prisoner camps, the narrative focuses on the trains’ cheerful “tootle” (69) to one another and not on the prisoners’ desperation expected in such a situation (Wepler 104). Also, in the aftermath of the bombing, the buildings of Dresden become filled with nothing but “ashes and dollops of melted glass” (Vonnegut 179; Wepler 104).

The playfulness of language in *Slaughterhouse-Five* can at times be “screamingly funny,” as Vonnegut would have it. However, it is not an aspect that allows the novel to be read as a comedy, given the gravity and the emotional implications of its subject matter. Laughter is not done for the sake of laughing, but rather to keep from crying. The “black” component in Vonnegut’s humour is impossible to ignore.

Besides purposefully simple language and phonetically complicated words, the process of “accommodation through laughter” relies on many other comic techniques. One of them, equally effective in producing a giggle or at least a raised eyebrow, is the use of bizarre, unexpected similes (Wepler 105). The narrator uses them to evoke an elaborate image in the readers’ mind, often with no connection to the situation in which they are mentioned. A very pictorial example is an antitank gun’s sound compared to “the opening of the zipper of Gold Almighty” (34). On another occasion, menacing German soldiers are

depicted approaching fast, but the narrator has enough time to notice that “they had teeth like piano keys” (64). According to Wepler, these similes have the effect of making the readers pause for a second and forget about the seriousness of the event that is unfolding before them (105). Instead, the narrator leads them to focus on everyday items or insignificant objects. The humorous effect here is caused by the element of surprise in combination with the sudden intrusion of banality where it is least expected.

The elements analysed so far show that the most productive use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five* relies on playing with the readers’ expectations: unsophisticated language for a topic that demands complexity, ludicrous words and bizarre images appearing in moments of tension. But Vonnegut does not stop at the use of language and images, there is yet another strategy that deserves mentioning. Irony, by definition, functions by undermining expectations and can be identified in numerous instances in the novel.

An example of ironic situation is found early in Chapter 2, in the account of how Billy was captured by the Germans. The two scouts that accompany Billy are depicted as model soldiers, “clever, graceful, quiet,” carrying guns (32). By contrast, Billy and Roland Weary appear “empty-handed,” and “clumsy and dense,” respectively (32). The irony lies in the fact that, from their group, Billy and Weary survive because of their incompetence — the Germans who had spotted them were intrigued to see two American soldiers fighting each other. The scouts, on the other hand, were shot on sight. The grim conclusion of this episode is that the strong, confident, well-equipped for war are not always guaranteed to survive it and they are at the mercy of fate just as everyone else.

The function of irony is to signal the absurdity of situations like these. They are abundant in the novel and contribute to creating an overall sense of the absurd which dominates the entire narrative. Here, “accommodation by laughter” means trying to compete with the absurdity of the real world by creating a similarly senseless one in fiction.

Closely related to irony is satire, and the scene of Billy’s capture can serve as an example for both. Satire at its core is based on an attack aimed at exposing something that is considered wrong (Hume, *Diffused Satire* 305). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the most obvious target of satire is the generalised image

of the American soldier. Vonnegut mocks this image as often as he can. Billy, as the protagonist, is depicted as the very antithesis of the American war hero: “Billy was preposterous - six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. ... He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo” (33).

Billy is not the only target, practically every American soldier is ridiculed. Roland Weary, although brave, deludes himself into thinking he is capable. The two scouts, initially appearing otherwise, also prove their ineffectiveness by getting shot from behind. Later in the novel, colonel Wild Bob is unable to accept that he lost his entire regiment and the whole group of American prisoners is caricatured when compared to their British counterparts.

Physical humour or slapstick humour plays an important role in the caricaturisation of American soldiers. It entails “strong visualisations” of comic aspects of the soldiers’ physical features or malfunctioning bodies (Beck 59). The narrator insists on depicting details like peculiar body shapes, such as Billy’s shape “like a bottle of Coca-Cola” (23), or bodily functions like “excreting into steel helmets” (70).

Because of their indirectness, irony and satire are unquestionably among the best techniques for expressing the “bitter amusement” of black humour. However, since the notion of bitter amusement can be a vague one itself, I would like to further enquire into its possible meanings. Robert Scholes, for instance, offers a more specific view. He understands black humour as “a form of rational comedy whose satire expresses a subtle faith in the humanising power of laughter” (qtd. in Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 11). In depicting the soldiers as he does (weak, ridiculous, fearful and innocent), Vonnegut is highlighting their humanity, calling attention to the “grotesque nature of their survival” and to the “human face of war” (Gallagher 78). His subtle faith is hoping that readers will understand that glamorous and romanticised views of war are nothing but falsifications of its true nature. Thus, Vonnegut is successful in exposing not only the absurdity of war, but also of the conventional accounts about it.

The techniques responsible for comical effects in *Slaughterhouse-Five* reach their most subtle form with the use of parody, the last source of humour

that will be discussed in this section. Parody relies on “a mocking imitation of the style of a literary work or works, ridiculing the stylistic habits of an author or school by exaggerated mimicry” (Baldick 185).

On the whole, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be read as a parody of the realistic genre: the metafictional elements, the non-linear narrative, and the inclusion of the science fiction subplot enable such a reading. Moreover, an allusion to this occurs when one of the characters tells Billy that “everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoevsky. But that isn’t enough anymore” (101).

A close reading of the novel will reveal the presence of parody in more discrete instances as well. Billy’s last name resonates with *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the story of a religious journey towards salvation (Shi 7). Ironically, Billy’s only possible salvation proves to be self-delusion; his own spiritual journey takes him to a distant planet, the only place where he can forget all the horrors of the world (Shi 7).

Parody becomes even more noticeable when its target is represented by Bible episodes. The comical effect in this case is achieved by the narrator constantly undermining their relevance in the novel’s plot. For example, Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack appear as Adam and Eve figures when they are imprisoned and put on display on Tralfamadore. However, the narrator quickly dismisses this image when he affirms that for Tralfamadorians the most interesting earthling is Charles Darwin (Shi 8).

Mocking different texts like the Bible or different styles like literary realism appears out of the need to interrogate existent value systems and modes of representation. Parodies, therefore, serve as a comical reminder to acknowledge a plurality of perspectives and discourses rather than to settle for a unifying view. This is a convenient moment to return to the discussion of the relationship between black humour and postmodernism, because the aforesaid interrogative disposition, prompted by the “preoccupation with the viability of systems of representation,” is considered another key feature of postmodern fiction (Woods 65).

Black humour, through the instrument of parody, provides the means for voicing this concern in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The novel expresses disbelief and

questions many assumptions like the viability of written history; the myths of the American war hero and American superiority; the norms of the conventional novel or the human capacity to make sense of reality.

Questioning certainties entails the acceptance of multiplicity and leads to the gradual elimination of hierarchies — for postmodernism no alternative view can take precedence over the rest. As such, laughter instead of crying must come at no surprise. Vonnegut himself expressed this exact thought when he declared that “laughs are exactly as honourable as tears” (qtd. in Klinkowitz, “Die Laughing” 15).

Slaughterhouse-Five exemplifies the collapsing hierarchy between laughs and cries, but it also achieves much more than that. The humorous effects of the plain language, combined with the innocent eye perspective and the use of whimsical words, create a narrative that is close to the common reader’s vernacular and experience of life, more so than any story based on grandiosity and heroism would have been. As Klinkowitz puts it, Vonnegut’s humour successfully “brings down the high to the low, the arrogant to the weak, the prideful to the humble“ (“Die Laughing” 17). This illustrates how black humour successfully makes manifest another postmodern tenet, related to pushing the boundary between “high and popular forms of culture” (Woods 65). By going as far as using words like “motherfucker” in the novel (34), Vonnegut juggles with the limits of what is acceptable and what not, continuously disarming expectations and conventions.

This continuous quest for reinventing form and content is one of the distinctive marks of postmodernism. Its origins can be traced to an underlying impression of exhaustion generally felt towards the existing modes of expression and aesthetic principles in the 1960s (Woods 52). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this feeling of exhaustion is frequently transmitted by its numerous intertextual and metafictional references. Apart from the already discussed allusions to the inappropriateness of idealistic heroic narratives or the perceived insufficiency of the realist novel, in Chapter 9, the death of the novel is mentioned as a preoccupation among literary critics (205). Another occasion points to the degradation of fiction, by suggesting that the commercial best-

seller *The Valley of the Dolls* is the most representative book in the English language (87).

These remarks often appear in humorous, anecdotal form, with apparently little connection to the main plot. But grouped and analysed as a whole, they reveal the ways in which black humour proves once more to be a useful tool for evidentiating postmodern concerns. Regarding the idea of exhaustion, Vonnegut goes a step further: he does not conform with recurring to black humour to signal the exhaustion of fiction, but also uses it to offer a way out of it. Oddly enough, the answers are provided by Tralfamadore subplot, to which I will now turn my attention.

“There is no why”: Making sense of the Tralfamadorian “telegraphic schizophrenic manner of telling tales”

So far the present exercise of analysing the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five* has identified many different correlations between the “bitter amusement” from the basic definition of the term and several concrete aspects of the novel. The same definition will also be considered for the development of this third section, but the focus will shift to its second part, which adds that the bitter amusement usually occurs in a “manner usually calculated to offend and shock.”

The Tralfamadore fantasy, surrounding the entire narrative, is probably the most shocking part of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and likely the most humorous as well. In Vonnegut’s typical fashion, he does not simply allow readers to infer about the influence of the Tralfamadore subplot on the rest of the narrative, but he actually chooses to declare this openly before the novel even begins. Thus, the title page reads, among other things, “this is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from peace.” With words like “schizophrenic” and the mention of science fiction elements like planets and flying saucers, Vonnegut already sets the ground for the unconventional novel that will follow and achieves the calculated effect of offending and shocking that black humour presumes.

Readers are not offered another hint about the Tralfamadorian manner of telling tales until further in the novel, when a Tralfamadorian tells Billy that their novels are read like telegrams:

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 one time, 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 (88).

After this moment, the Tralfamadorian idea of a novel as a structuring principle for *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes evident. The schizophrenic manner of narration means jumping from one isolated moment to another, with no regard for temporal sequence, spatial coherence or causality. This is seen in Billy's moving back and forth between different moments from his childhood, his time in the war, his postwar suburban life and his capture by Tralfamadorians. But the same principles apply to the first chapter, where the readers follow Vonnegut the narrator through different years and places, as he struggles to put together a book about Dresden. And finally, going all the way back to the initial rambling accounts on the title page, readers come to the realisation that the entire book they have before them is a Tralfamadorian novel made up of "brief, urgent messages" that appear and must be read simultaneously.

Thus, the "short, jumbled and jangled" book announced by Vonnegut in the first chapter is the result, as Klinkowitz describes it, of the "Tralfamadorian literary theory that sounds very much like an outline of the reinvented form Kurt Vonnegut uses for his own novel" (*Reforming* 67). The obvious conclusion of this connection is that this reinvented form of the novel is the only one that will allow a subject as senseless as the Dresden massacre to be structured into words.

Acknowledging the implications of the Tralfamadore subplot provides a more comprehensive image of the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Glenn Meeter summarises the two main sources of tension in the novel which may derive in black humour: between tone and material, as it has been

previously seen, but also between two types of material — real and fantastic (qtd. in Klinkowitz and Somer 199). Regarding the fantastic material, namely the Tralfamadore parts, black humour can be seen operating on several different fronts.

For instance, a humorous effect is caused by episodes from Dresden and Tralfamadore appearing side by side. One moment, Billy is seen entering a German prison camp, the next is he is on a spaceship on his way to Tralfamadore (84-85). Both episodes are told in the novel's typical matter-of-fact, unpretentious style and neither the narrator nor Billy appears to give more weight to either of them, despite the fact that reality seems to be mingling with fantasy.

An equally comical example is the sharp contrast between the ridiculous appearance of the Tralfamadorians, "two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends" (26), and the surprising depth of their ideas about life, death and free will. Such contrast raises some concerns about Vonnegut's attitude towards Tralfamadorians and begs the question of whether there is more to read into their role in the narrative. In fact, this is a recurrent topic of debate among the critics who have approached *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The discussion is worthwhile here because it can show how black humour is relatable to the novel on a deeper, moral level, ultimately connected to the authorial message and to *Slaughterhouse-Five's* statement as a literary work.

The Tralfamadorians' metaphor of time involves seeing all moments at once: "past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist" (27). Adopting this view entails accepting that nothing can be changed and that humans are essentially like "bugs trapped in amber" with no control over their destiny (86). Despite knowing how the universe will end, its death cannot be prevented, because "the moment is structured that way" (117). As a result, it becomes pointless to speak of free will and implicitly of personal responsibility. Since the course of events is unalterable, the only possible response to death is one of resigned acceptance.

The important question that has preoccupied criticism is whether Vonnegut accepts this philosophy or ridicules it. At a first approximation, it seems that he fully embraces it, because the narrative adopts the

Tralfamadorian “schizophrenic manner of tales.” The repetition of “So it goes,” the Tralfamadorian reaction to death, also seems to indicate it. However, the novel offers just as many clues that point otherwise.

In the first place, Vonnegut puts the existence of Tralfamadorians into doubt by hinting that it is merely a fabrication of Billy Pilgrim’s mind, a delusion he creates in order to be able to overcome the traumatic experience of the massacre. Although the Tralfamadorian philosophy brings Billy great comfort, he is never taken seriously by any of the other characters and his absence is not felt during his time and space travels. Moreover, the striking similarities between the Tralfamadorians and Kilgore Trout’s novels suggest that Billy found inspiration in them for his fantasy.

Secondly, the passive acceptance preached by Tralfamadorians is also interrogated through parallels between the science fiction world of the distant planet and the real world of the rest of the novel. These basically insinuate the outcome of the Tralfamadorian teachings put into practice. The most telling example occurs when Billy, after being captured by Tralfamadorians, asks them “Why me?”. The answer he receives is “Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? There is no *why* (76-77). A dozen pages later, when an American prisoner is hit by a German guard, he asks him the same question and receives the same answer: “Vy you? Vy anybody?” (91). By having the German guard repeat the Tralfamadorians’ words, Vonnegut seems to want to imply that, in practice, the Tralfamadorian philosophy is simply morally wrong. Denying moral responsibility combined with unquestioning acceptance and lack of reaction is what allows wars and massacres to happen. The Tralfamadorian detachment appears incompatible with Vonnegut’s commitment of writing, or at least attempting to write an anti-war book.

In conclusion, Vonnegut seemingly both accepts and rejects the Tralfamadorian philosophy. For critics like Max Schulz, this aligns with the purpose of black humour fiction, which in his view is characterised by “a determined resistance of the narrative to confirm its own thesis” (64). *Slaughterhouse-Five* resists being a fully Tralfamadorian novel. Vonnegut presents the appeal of their philosophy, which has been translated by critics into many different terms like quietism, fatalism, determinism, escapism or nihilism;

but ultimately distances himself from it, letting readers decide if it should be the proper response to an event like Dresden. Schulz refers to this strategy as holding “a limited number of viewpoints in equipoise, as literary counterparts of a world devoid of a discursive value system” and considers it typical of black humour fiction and best exemplified in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (43).

It is interesting that Schulz spoke of black humour fiction a few years before the use of the term “postmodernism” became widespread, simply because many of the features he attributed to black humour have equivalents in later descriptions of postmodern fiction. The “viewpoints in equipoise” are no different from the postmodern explorations of “a plurality of discourse formations,” or the tendency for indeterminacy prompted by the abandonment of a quest for a unifying view (Woods 4-6). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the Tralfamadorian notions show a possible way of understanding the world, but Vonnegut makes sure to demonstrate that it is not the only available way. Furthermore, he refuses to validate his own viewpoint by repeatedly ridiculing his person and the attempts to write about his experience, thus emphasising the postmodern idea of plurality of perspectives without a unifying centre.

Another bridge between black humour and postmodernism is created when analysing the Tralfamadore subplot strictly as a science fiction element in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The inclusion of a futuristic fantasy alongside historical and autobiographical material is by itself surprising, but responsible for the black humour effect is the fact that the narrator maintains the same simple, natural voice even as he describes flying saucers and aliens shaped like toilet plungers. This play between reality and fantasy, a method that John Barth described as “the contamination of reality by dream” (Klinkowitz and Somer 199-200), may be interpreted as a manifestation of the postmodern continuous attack on realism. As Woods noted, challenging realism is a common purpose among postmodern writers otherwise very heterogenous in their modes of writing (50). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the schizophrenic Tralfamadore reminds readers of “the fictitious aspect of our own existence”¹ (Klinkowitz and Somer 200), something which by means of traditional realism would be impossible to achieve.

¹ These are John Barth’s words quoted by Glenn Meeter in his essay “Vonnegut’s Formal and Moral Otherworldliness: *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.”

Even if on moral grounds the role of the Tralfamadore subplot is still debatable, in structural terms there is no doubt that it aptly encompasses the idea of the search for a new form that can replace the exhausted traditional narratives based on realism. A Tralfamadorian novel, a reinvented form that undermines previous conventions, is the answer to the frustrations caused by having to deal with such an ungraspable subject like the Dresden massacre. In this case, humour again is seen playing an important role, because it makes the transition to new forms much easier to accept by the readers.

“How did I get here?”: Black humour and Billy Pilgrim’s character

The act of reforming the novel, besides searching for new modes of narration, also involves the invention of a new type of hero, one that is forced to adapt to the insane world the writer needs to create in order to match the absurdity of real existence. Such a hero is embodied by Billy Pilgrim, whose life is deeply marked by his experience of the war and the witnessing of the Dresden firebombing. As the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy’s story constitutes the greatest part of the novel, with the notable exception of the first chapter, in which Vonnegut himself is the main character. This final section will consider the ways in which black humour is used in relation to Billy’s character and how it can influence the reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* at different levels.

In this context, challenging the readers’ assumptions is again one of the chief motives behind the use of black humour. A first observation could be the fact that it is appreciably difficult to decide whether Billy Pilgrim is an unremarkable or an exceptional character. These two viewpoints, just like the interpretations of the Tralfamadorian philosophy, are held “in equipoise” with the aid of black humour.

On one hand, the narrator goes to great lengths to present Billy as a simple, common type who does not understand more about war than the average American would. During the war, he is far from representing any heroic or soldierly ideal, and his life after that is typical of an American middle-class husband and father with a conventional job. Klinkowitz underlines that, in this regard, Billy Pilgrim is “a virtual Everyman; with nothing heroic about him, his

fate is simply to have survived World War II and the Dresden firebombing—and to wonder why” (*Effect* 99).

On the other hand, the same Billy experiences time travel being “unstuck in time” and is abducted by alien creatures from the distant planet of Tralfamadore. Hence, he becomes, as Klinkowitz observes, “a thoroughly unexceptional character who begins acting in a ridiculously exceptional manner” (*Reforming* 54). It is important to note the word “ridiculously” in Klinkowitz’s description, which is an acknowledgment of the humorous treatment of these aspects of Billy’s character. Neither the narrator nor any of the other characters, including his own family, seems to take Billy’s claims about time and space travel seriously.

Early in the second chapter, during the first account of Billy’s being unstuck in time, the narrator describes him as “leaning against a tree with his eyes closed,” his head “tilted back” and “his nostrils flaring” (43). The travelling seems to occur only in his head, possibly triggered by visual associations with moments from the present. At the same time though, the narrator distinguishes between Billy’s experiences of time travel and actual hallucinations (Harris 234). Only a few pages further, Billy dreams that “he was skating on a ballroom floor” (49). Notably, the narrator feels the need to clarify that “this wasn’t time travel, it had never happen and never would happen.” Time travel actually resumes a few moments later, when Billy finds himself in a Chinese restaurant from his hometown. Thus, although Billy’s accounts of time travelling are thoroughly ridiculed, the narrator still leaves a small door open that may suggest a different interpretation.

Further examples of Billy’s acting in a “ridiculously exceptional manner” are found after his first contact with the Tralfamadoreans. Upon being abducted, he is seen in one of the few situations wherein he enquires something of someone. Addressing the Tralfamadoreans, he asks “How did I get here?” (85). The answer to this question will provide the introduction to the Tralfamadoreans’ understanding of the world, summarised in Billy’s words: “You sound to me as though you don’t believe in free will” (86). Billy finds great comfort in this philosophy and makes efforts to spread it to the rest of the world. Yet he is unable to convince anyone and his attempts are met with disdain and ridiculed.

He is scorned by his daughter Barbara after writing letters about his time travels to the local newspaper (29), and when he mentions the Tralfamadorians in a radio talk show, he is politely asked to leave during the commercial break (206).

Billy's character oscillating between a conventional and an atypical protagonist stretches the narrative in two different directions, without privileging either of them. Readers must not wait too long to perceive this "equipoise," since it is readily apparent from the first pages of chapter two. As Klinkowitz observes, the first three pages of this chapter offer a brief summary of Billy's entire life: from his childhood, military service, marriage, profession to details of his physical appearance or medical history (*Reforming* 54). A person whose life can be summarised in three pages, using comments like "and so on" (27-30), is clearly unworthy of too much attention. Simultaneously though, the chapter begins by describing Billy's singular condition of being unstuck in time and drawing readers into the narrative using the imperative "listen" (23), all suggesting that there is something extraordinary in the story that is about to begin.

The aura of ridiculousness surrounding Billy's character is responsible for producing laughs or the bitter amusement specific of black humour. In some cases, Billy is ridiculed directly, as in the cartoonish descriptions of his physical appearance. But in many others, humour is used in more understated ways, often elusive in the absence of a careful reading.

For example, the author delimits himself from Billy and his story by adding the expressions "Billy says" or "he says" (27-30) when the episodes of time travel are first mentioned. Here, ridiculousness is suggested by a subtly expressed scepticism towards Billy's perceptions and understanding of the world. Moreover, Vonnegut as the first-person narrator from chapter one briefly reintroduces himself in the main narrative on three occasions by saying "That was me" (125; 148) or "I was there" (67), in situations where Billy Pilgrim is present as well. Such a strategy obviously wants to imply that Billy and Vonnegut are two different characters and they should not be confused.

In spite of this perceived distance, Vonnegut still manages to maintain a sense of sympathy towards Billy Pilgrim's character. After all, the greatest part of the narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is dedicated to him. Furthermore,

Vonnegut establishes a series of biographical parallels between him and Billy: they were both born in 1922, both had fathers who hunted and favourite dogs, they both participated in the war and were discharged in 1945, and got married shortly after returning home (Harris 232). But, most significantly, they shared and survived the experience of the Dresden firebombing, this being the single most impactful event of their lives.

The series of uncertainties about Billy, be it the tension between his interpretation as an exceptional or a commonplace protagonist, or the indeterminacy concerning the proximity and the distance with the author, eventually begs one final question: why did Vonnegut create Billy's character? What role does he fulfil in the novel? Attempting an answer to this question requires another delving into the motives and the possible messages that Vonnegut aimed to transmit with the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Since the defining event of Billy's life appears to be the Dresden massacre, it seems sensible to begin looking for answers there. On the whole, the entire narrative that starts in chapter two can be read as Billy's interpretation of the Dresden firebombing, told by a third-person omniscient narrator. More than an interpretation, it shows the emotionally devastating consequences that the massacre leaves on Billy, and depicts his intentions of trying to recover from it. These lead to his creation of the Tralfamadore fantasy, providing him with a satisfying explanation for the horrors he experienced: the events are "structured" that way, it is pointless to try to prevent them; the only thing that remains is to look the other way, at "the happy moments of life" (194).

Nevertheless, the happiness Billy finds in this wisdom is merely illusory. The narrative shows him jumping from one moment to another, without fully controlling or enjoying any of them, not even those related to his family life. He becomes the perfect image of a "bug trapped in amber" (77), the expression used by Tralfamadoreans to voice their condescending view of humans and of every creature in the universe for that matter.

By contrast, where Billy becomes trapped, Vonnegut decides to go further. Instead of turning his head, denying his experience and comforting himself with a delusion, he chooses to look back and write a book about Dresden, hoping it would help raise awareness and prevent another massacre

from happening. Even if this means him turning into “a pillar of salt,” like Lot’s wife (22), for Vonnegut looking back feels like the human thing to do. It is human to care about and recall the 135,000 lives lost in the Dresden firebombing and human to take a stance against whatever may lead to massacres like these. While Billy sends off his son to Vietnam, Vonnegut tells his own “that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee” (19; Merrill and Scholl 70).

In essence, the creation of Billy Pilgrim has the effect of strengthening Vonnegut’s pacifist message, enabling readers to discern that passivity, resignation and ignorance are not proper responses to events of the magnitude of the Dresden massacre. Black humour contributes to producing the adequate amount of ridiculousness, amusement and narrative distance needed to point out two opposing views and their ramifications.

Seen from the postmodern angle, the demarcation between Vonnegut and Billy underscores plurality and simultaneity, concepts that spring up after the conventions that lead to totalising views and unifying perspectives have been abandoned. Billy’s understanding of reality, based on denial of experience and finding refuge in fantasy, can be judged as faulty at many different levels, but it represents a possibility nonetheless. And one of the pivotal concerns of postmodern fiction, inherited from modernism, is to illustrate the countless possibilities of “how we see the world, rather than what we see in it” (Woods 7).

For postmodernists, the main point of focus are not the events, but our responses to it. Hence, a postmodern novel about Dresden will naturally tend to shift from portraying the firebombing itself to exploring the personal circumstances and emotional effects associated with it. Billy Pilgrim perfectly incarnates what Ronald Sukenick described as “the sense of consciousness struggling with circumstance” (Baym, Franklin, and Levine 371); his reactions and interpretations are simply an attempt to make sense of a world ruled by randomness, where certainties are not very frequent. To the average readers he inevitably becomes a sympathetic and relatable character, since they are likely to share the same concern in their daily lives.

Regarding postmodern fiction, Sukenick also argued that the novel, in order to maintain its relevance for the readers, must be in constant innovation (Baym, Franklin, and Levine 371). The moment it gets “frozen in a particular model,” it runs the risk of losing its capacity to reflect our immediate experience and collective consciousness. In the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it can be argued that the characterisation of Billy Pilgrim is one of the innovations that opens the way for the reinvention of the novel. Among Vonnegut’s master achievements is the creation of a character who, despite appearing unreliable, manages to be far from irrelevant when it comes to remaining in touch with the readers’ attitudes, emotions and experiences. Without the presence of black humour, which facilitates the transition to and the acceptance of such innovations, this task would have been much more difficult.

**”I prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterwards”:
Conclusion**

Having reached this point, after examining the use of black humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five* from multiple perspectives, a series of conclusions may be forwarded, leading the way to an attempt to evaluate the hypothesis introduced at the beginning of the analysis.

In the first place, I believe it is safe to affirm that the approach based on the use of simple, dictionary definitions of black humour has yielded productive results. Baldick’s plain explanation from *The Dictionary of Literary Terms* has provided a suitable starting point for relating black humour and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Other similar interpretations, by different critics like Jerome Klinkowitz, Kathryn Hume or Max Schulz, have helped to create a more complete image of the concept of black humour and its different connections with Vonnegut’s novel. Vonnegut’s own comments about laughter and its role in fiction has offered several important clues about the motivations that can account for the use of humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. A general conclusion of these findings can be summarised in the statement that black humour, in one form or another, is present in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and must not be overlooked when analysing the novel.

Secondly, it is pertinent to note that, despite the positive outcome of such an approach, caution must always be exerted when making generalisations about literary works. For instance, can we go as far as to label *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a “black humour novel”? The answer is most likely a negative one. While black humour is certainly a feature of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, defining a novel after one of its characteristics means moving into dangerous terrain. The same applies to the interpretation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or any of Vonnegut’s novels for that matter, as a work of science fiction. Black humour and science fiction are components or particular aspects of the novel, but whether or not they are representative for the entire work remains a highly debatable topic. Here, I find it relevant to recall once more that Vonnegut openly dismissed, in his peculiar style, his labelling as both black humorist and science fiction writer.

The understanding of black humour as a distinct literary movement of the 1960s poses similar problems. The tag, first used by Bruce Jay Friedman in 1965, grouped together several markedly diverse writers such as Joseph Heller, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, and, of course, Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut himself referred to this group as a random number of crickets caught under a bell jar (qtd. in Klinkowitz and Somer 99). As such, speaking of black humour and black humorists as a literary phenomenon does not possess the same cohesion or distinctiveness as other movements like, for example, the Beats generation or imagism. My personal inference in this case is that, when discussing black humour, it is best to refer to it as a set of possible characteristics of a literary work rather than perceiving it as a term that designates a literary movement in its own right.

A third point to keep in mind is that the different features associated with black humour may vary from one literary work to another. Most of the definitions of the term provide only general descriptions, without outlining a set of clearly distinguishable attributes for black humour. In the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I have found that various aspects, ranging from the use of language, to instances of sarcasm, irony and parody may qualify as black humour, because they are in consonance with the “bitter amusement” asserted in Baldick’s definition. For other novels, different devices may be similarly effective. Here, the main conclusion is that, when attempting to identify black humour, one must

look for the details that set it apart from “conventional” humour lacking the “black” attribute. In my analysis, I have aimed to find the motivations that can account for the presence of black humour, and also to show that, despite its numerous comical aspects, *Slaughterhouse-Five* cannot be read as a comedy. Responsible for this fact is the peculiarity of black humour and the grounds that determine its use.

The final and probably the most challenging question to answer is whether or not black humour can be viewed as a general characteristic of postmodern fiction. The difficulty lies, on one hand, in the complexity of everything that the term postmodernism can encompass, and, on the other, in the vagueness of black humour as a concept.

As far as *Slaughterhouse-Five* is concerned, my underlying objective over the different sections of my paper has been to identify possible connections between the occurrence of black humour in the novel and various postmodern tenets. The analysis has indeed shown that seeking to explain the use of black humour may lead to several postmodern assumptions, including the loss of faith in master narratives, the distancing from realism, the levelling between high and low culture or the inclination towards narrative reflexivity.

However, extrapolating and stating that black humour is a feature of postmodernism amounts to a bold claim. Significantly, Woods’s catalogue of key characteristics of postmodern fiction in *Beginning Postmodernism* contains no mention of black humour, suggesting that he does not see it as something inextricably tied to postmodernism. After an in-depth review of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and of many relevant works on both postmodernism and black humour, my interpretation is that it, when analysing black humour, it is best to see it as a device that may allow certain postmodern assumptions to surface, rather than a postmodern characteristic in its own right. Klinkowitz offers a very compelling explanation as to why a writer would choose black humour as a technique: the use of humour prevents the novel from being perceived as a radical experiment, a sensation often perceived with postmodern fiction (*Reforming* 75).

In addition, if we accept the existence of a generation of black humour writers of the 1960s, with Vonnegut as one of its prominent authors, then black humour could also be interpreted as a certain stage in the development of

postmodernism, similar to others such as cyberpunk sci-fi or brat-pack fiction. In this view, black humour fiction overlaps with the early days of postmodernism, when writers searched for modes to reflect the perceived lack of meaning and cohesion in the world.

At any rate, black humour remains a state of mind, a peculiar attitude which relies on laughter as a solution for maintaining sanity in a changing and random world becoming increasingly short of assurances. And we already know why laughter is preferable, because Vonnegut told us: “there is less cleaning up to do afterwards” (qtd. in Klinkowitz, “How to Die Laughing” 15).

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