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Teaching Kurt Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse-Five

from

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by

Douglas Grudzina



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General Introduction to the Work

About the Author

KURT VONNEGUT, JR. WAS BORN IN Indianapolis, Indiana in 1922, the fourth generation of a prominent German-American family. His father was an architect, and his mother was noted for her beauty. They both spoke fluent German but declined to teach their children the language due to the widespread anti-German sentiment that permeated the country after World War I.

Vonnegut's two siblings had been able to attend private schools, but the Great Depression greatly reduced the family's resources, so Vonnegut had to attend Shortridge High School, a public high school in Indianapolis. Later, Vonnegut would admit that he appreciated the broader perspective and insight into human nature that his public school education afforded him. While in high school, Vonnegut edited the only daily high school newspaper in the United States.

He briefly attended Butler University, leaving when one of his professors criticized his writing. He then attended Cornell where his father and brother insisted that he study chemistry. He also wrote for the *Cornell Daily Sun*. In 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and became an advance scout with the U.S. 106th Infantry Division. In 1944, he was taken prisoner following the Battle of the Bulge.

After the war, Vonnegut married his childhood sweetheart and entered a master's degree program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He also worked as a reporter for the *Chicago City News Bureau*. He later attributed his unadorned writing style to his experience as a reporter. His master's thesis, titled "Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales," was unanimously rejected by the anthropology department faculty. He left Chicago for Schenectady, New York, to take a job in public relations at a General Electric research lab.

Vonnegut left GE in 1951 and moved to Cape Cod to devote himself full-time to writing. His growing family struggled financially through the 1950s, and he had become the kind of writer whose little-known paperbacks were sold on wire racks in the back of drug stores. (Most critics assume Vonnegut himself was the inspiration for his recurring character, Kilgore Trout.) He was on the verge of abandoning writing when, in 1965 he was offered a teaching position at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. That same year, *Cat's Cradle*, which had been published in 1963, became a bestseller, and Vonnegut was established as a major American writer.

His first novel, *Player Piano*, appeared in 1952. *Sirens of Titan* was published in 1959, followed by *Mother Night* in 1962, *Cat's Cradle* in 1963, *God Bless You, Mr. Rose-water* in 1965, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969.

In 1979, Vonnegut divorced his first wife and married the photographer Jill Krementz. Despite a suicide attempt in 1984, he continues to write and teach. At the age of 82, he published his most recent book, *A Man Without a Country*, in September 2005.

New Historicism Applied to *Slaughterhouse-Five*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining the Structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as A Mid-Twentieth-Century Cultural Artifact

1. Divide the class in groups of three or four and have each group compose a chronological timeline of Billy Pilgrim's life, specifying the date (at least the year) of events whenever possible.
2. Allow the groups to report back to the class and discuss any discrepancies between different groups' timelines.
3. Discuss why these discrepancies occurred. (Note, it is more important to appreciate that some of the events in Billy's life story have fixed dates—e.g. the bombing of Dresden—while others are less specific.)
4. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - What, if anything, would the story have *gained* if Vonnegut had told it in a more conventional (i.e. linear) fashion?
 - What, if anything, would the story have *lost* if Vonnegut had told it in a more conventional (i.e., linear) fashion?
 - For better or for worse, what is the overall effect of the disjointed time sequence Vonnegut uses?
 - What might there have been in mid-twentieth-century American culture that would have motivated Vonnegut to write his “famous Dresden book” like this?

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Slaughterhouse-Five*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to ...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisiacal life and viewpoint to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her step-mother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punishment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth.

Formalism Applied to *Slaughterhouse-Five*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author’s life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining Use of Repetition in the Novel

1. Divide the class into six groups (or a number of groups divisible by six).
2. Assign each group one of the following refrains or motifs and have them examine the novel, noting each instance in which the motif appears. Then have them answer the following questions:
 - Poo-tee-weet?
 - So it goes.
 - “poor, old Edgar Derby”/”poor, old doomed Edgar Derby”
 - barking dogs
 - “mustard gas and roses”
 - blue and ivory
 - the Serenity prayer

 - How many times does your motif appear in the novel?
 - *When* does it appear:
 - During Billy’s wartime experience?
 - During Billy’s post-war, earth life?
 - During Billy’s Tralfamadorian life?

 - Is it associated with a particular event? A particular character?
 - What does the motif contribute to the *structure* of the novel?
 - What does the motif contribute to the *artistic effect* of the novel?
 - What does the motif contribute to the *meaning* of the novel?
3. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report.