

Metafiction and Its Philosophical Implications in Kurt Vonnegut's Major Novels

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Abstract

Metafiction is one of the techniques that postmodern writers utilized in their novels in order to find a way out of their dilemma, that was writing novels when some critics had announced its death. Metafiction, instead of putting a mirror up to human nature or reality, puts a mirror up to the art of novel writing itself, so that the readers may understand that some concepts such as "History" and "Reality" are human constructs and it is absolutely impossible to get hold of the absolute truth. Kurt Vonnegut is one of the prominent novelists of our era and his novels mainly aim at criticizing the culture of the contemporary American society and criticizing the catastrophes such as war. Vonnegut by using metafiction in his major novels challenges the concepts of "History" and "Reality" in order to give the readers a better understanding of the authenticity of these abstract terms.

Key Words: Postmodern fiction, epistemology, ontology, history, reality.

1. Introduction

As the prefix "post" in Postmodernism implies, it is a term, generally applied to the post-war era, to describe the new modes of thought and writing that most of contemporary artists use in their works. Architecture was the first branch of art to embrace postmodernism and later other arts, such as literature followed the example of architecture too. The novels that were written from the late 1960's onward were radically different in both their form and content from the novels preceding them. According to Brian McHale the modernist literature is mainly concerned with "epistemological" issues, whereas postmodernist literature's main concern is "ontological" issues (McHale, 1987: 9-11).

Or to put it in another way, in modern literature the *dominant* used to be the epistemological inquiries in general, but in postmodern literature these inquiries are shifted to ontological inquiries. When somebody reads a modern text, such as *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) or *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), s/he is always reminded that there *is* one concrete truth, but the *way* which ends up to that is not a straightforward one; there are a great deal of dead-ends and misleading signs, but finally there is only *one* correct destination to arrive at. Some of the questions that are mainly raised by modern literature (and especially modern fiction) are as follows:

... How can one interpret this world of which he is a part? What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it? And with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower? What are the limits of knowledge?... (McHale, 1987: 12)

According to Brian McHale, in postmodern fiction these questions change to:

... What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there? How are they constructed, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between the worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text and what is the mode of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured?... (Ibid: 13)

Although Ontology and Epistemology are quite different from each other but in order to respond to the epistemological inquiries, one needs to find the responses to the ontological inquiries beforehand. Realist texts did not have any doubts about the unity of the universe and the realism of their texts mirrored the same thing too, Modernists on the other hand were quite confident of the existence of the concrete truth, but believed that the ways which end up to that are various, not divergent. But

.... Postmodern artists believed that there was no reality to be reflected or imitated. Postmodernists in believing that there is no absolute truth and the universe has no center and consequently coherence and meaning do not exist, neither in the world, nor in a text, are closer in their tastes to post-structuralists and deconstructionists.... (Meghdadi, 2001: 11)

Having this distinction in mind gives the reader a good perspective to understand the differences between modern and postmodern novels as a whole. However the main focus of

this article is on metafiction which is one the most prominent techniques in writing postmodern novels.

2. Discussion

The term “metafiction” itself was used for the first time in 1970 by the American novelist/critic, William Gass, in his essay “Fiction and the Figures of Life” (Waugh, 1984: .2) . In that essay he dubbed the novel’s self-reflexive tendency, “Metafiction” (Ibid). Metafiction, According to Patricia Waugh,

...is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality....(Ibid).

Therefore a work can be defined as “Metafictional” when it openly declares its artificiality. A metafictional work knowingly lays bare the conventions of fiction and draws attention to the language and literary style it uses. In other words, it is fiction about fiction (Ward, 2003: 31). Metafiction writers

...work within the tradition of novel as an art form, but do so with a critical, ironic awareness of that tradition. As Waugh puts it, they aim 'simultaneously create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (Ibid)....

Metafiction self-consciously challenges the boundary between the text and the world and by doing this, foregrounds the ontological status of fictional world and the real world. In the present era, most of the writers are aware of the theoretical developments that have been made in the field of literary criticism and they reflect this self-consciousness, which is the result of the same awareness, in their works. One of the major elements in all metafictional novels is that, “they all explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction” (Waugh, 1984: 2). Furthermore, metafictionists are highly conscious of a basic dilemma,

...if he or she sets out to “represent” the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world as such can not be “represented”. In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to “represent” the *discourses* of that world. Yet if one attempts to analyze a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as the instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a “prison-house” from which the possibility of escape is remote. Metafiction sets out to explore this dilemma....(Ibid: 3-4).

Novelists, in 1960's, applied new techniques to write a "different kind of fiction". Metafiction has been implicit in many other types of fictional works, but in the postmodern fiction, it became the dominant subject of novel writing. In 1970, William H. Gass wrote an essay in which he dubbed the novel's self-reflexive tendency "metafiction" (Ibid: 2). Critics of post-modern metafiction claim that it marks the death or exhaustion of the novel as a genre, while advocates argue that it signals the novel's rebirth. Devotees claim that other genres have undergone the same critical self-reflexivity and that the definition of the novel itself, "notoriously defies definition" (Ibid: 5). Patricia Waugh comments that, "contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of external verities but a series

of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (Ibid: 7).

As it was mentioned earlier, the major concern of all metafictional novels is laying bare their own artificiality and foregrounding the ontological problems that have been repressed in the earlier novels. To accomplish this aim, writers of Metafiction make use of different genres for their novels. However their favorite genres seem to be Science fiction and Fantastic. These genres have been used more than others in metafictional novels. Science fiction

...by staging 'close encounters' between different worlds, [and] placing them in confrontation, foregrounds their respective structures and the disparities between them. It thus obeys the same underlying principle of ontological poetics as postmodernist fiction...(McHale, 1987: 60).

Furthermore, the concept of different worlds has always been present in the genre of science fiction. The "other" world can be located in different time, space or other dimensions.

Fantastic genre may seem to be an exclusively modern one, but a closer study of that reveals its postmodern (and therefore metafictional) potentials. Tzvetan Todorov believes that fantastic literature is "the synthesis of dream and reality" (Meghdadi, 1999: 51), therefore the ambiguity is in the heart of such works. In other words it involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (real) and the impossible (dream), the normal and paranormal.

...Another world penetrates and encroaches upon our world, or some representatives of our world penetrate an outpost of the other world. Either way, this participates a confrontation between real-world norms (the laws of nature) and other-worldly, super-natural norms... (McHale, 1987: 75).

But this does not mean that all fantastic literature can be categorized as postmodern or metafictional. In fact, from the emergence of fantastic in the eighteenth century to Kafka's Metamorphosis (1915) an epistemological structure has been "superimposed upon the underlying dual ontological structure of the fantastic, naturalizing and 'psychologizing' it" (McHale, 1987: 76). But in the years since "Metamorphosis", this epistemological structure has been eliminated, and the ontological deep structure of the fantastic behind it has become transparent (Ibid). Hence many metafiction writers have used this genre in their works to explore its ontological poetics.

Another major device to create metafictional novels is using celebrities as fictional characters. Since the Celebrities' names always have always been attractive for the readers, by using this device, writers make "scandals" about those celebrities. Such kind of scandal has an ontological source, because it enables the metafiction writers to violate the boundaries between the worlds.

...There is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters..... In general, the presence in a fictional world of a character who is transworld-identical with a real world figure sends shock-waves throughout the world's ontological structure... (Ibid: 85).

Finally, the last major device for creating metafiction is projecting and canceling different worlds. Metafiction writers deliberately use sub-literary or "sensational" genres – such as thrillers, gothic, horror, pornography, melodrama, farce, etc. – which appeal to their "readers'

lowest instincts". But

.... The aim of such sensationalism is to lure the reader into making an emotional investment sequence "under erasure", typically by arousing his or her anxieties, fascination with taboo, or prurient interests. Having become "involved" in the representation, the reader thus resents it when the representation is de-presented, erased. The reader's impulse to cling to the erased sequence heightens the tension between (desired) presence and (resented) absence... narrated events, then, can be un-narrated, placed "under erasure"; and in much the same way, projected existents – objects, characters and so on – can have their existence revoked....(McHale, 1987: 102-103).

Thereby the novel foregrounds its own fictionality and artificiality. And the reader is again reminded of the ontological status of the book and the story that he has been reading.

Metafiction, like most of the other characteristics of postmodernism, is not something new and it is almost as old as the novel tradition itself. In other words, metafiction has always co-existed with the novel tradition. Patricia Waugh even claims that "metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels" (Waugh, 1984: 5). However it is only in contemporary literature that this tendency becomes *dominant*. The first explicitly metafictional novel was The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy (1767) by Lawrence Sterne. In this Novel, Sterne completely diverges from the usual norms of novel writing that were practiced by other writers of his time. The unconventional time scheme and its self-declared digressive-progressive style, was rejected by many critics at that time. However in the course of history, Tristram Shandy survived all the formal and technical changes of novel tradition; and today it is considered as a canonical work and a predecessor for the metafictional novels of the postmodern era.

One of the best examples of metafictional novels is The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) by John Fowles. The topic of this novel is a romantic relationship in the nineteenth century; and up to chapter thirteen there is nothing wrong with the story. The reader follows the life and fortunes of the male character, Charles, his fiancée Ernestina, and a mysterious woman called Sarah. Chapter thirteen begins coyly with Fowles teasing the reader: "I do not know. This story that I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (Fowles, 1969: 85), he invites different interpretations for the novel: "Perhaps Charles is myself disguised" (Ibid: 85). Then he discusses the stance of the novelist. Though the Victorian novelists stood next to God, he could not usurp all the vitality of his novel; fictional worlds must be treated as living organisms, not as machines. He also enters his novel as a "massively bearded face" and shares a train compartment with Charles during a trip from Exeter to London. Fowles in some chapters of his novel directly addresses the readers and discusses the difficulties of novel writing in our age. He also uses three endings for the novel. The first ending which is a typical Victorian happy ending almost comes in the middle of the book. (Charles marries Ernestina) This ending is a "thoroughly traditional ending" (Ibid: 295) according to Fowles himself. The second and third ending come at the end of book. In one of them Charles and Sarah decide to live together because of their daughter, and in the next one Charles loses Sarah almost forever. However these endings are

not closed ones and the reader will not have a real sense of ending. Therefore “Fowles’ double ending represents a minimal structure of non-ending” (McHale, 1987: 110).

In the post-war era Kurt Vonnegut has been credited as one of the most prominent authors whose novels and ideas has affected several generations. From the early 1950’s to the late 1990’s, (Timequake was published in 1997), Vonnegut has remained a prolific writer. But none of his novels have been able to repeat the success of Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) and Breakfast of Champions (1973). Many critics, who were ignorant of Vonnegut’s works, wrote rave reviews on Slaughterhouse-Five and hailed the emergence of a new author, whose schizophrenic style completely matched the present era.

Slaughterhouse-Five treats one of the most horrific massacres in European history – the World War II firebombing of Dresden, a city in eastern Germany, on February 13, 1945 – with mock-serious humor and clear anti-war sentiment. Over 130,000 civilians died in Dresden, roughly the same number of deaths that resulted from the Allied bombing raids on Tokyo and from the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, both of which also occurred in 1945. The inhabitants of Dresden were incinerated or suffocated in a matter of hours as a firestorm sucked up and consumed available oxygen.

Breakfast of Champions is a story of “two lonesome, skinny old men on a planet which was dying fast” (Vonnegut, 1973: 17). One of these men is Dwayne Hoover, a “fabulously well-to-do” Pontiac Dealer, and the other is Kilgore Trout, an “unknown” and unsuccessful science fiction writer. These two characters are destined to meet in Midland City and Kilgore Trout’s book Now It Can Be Told is destined to turn Dwayne Hoover into “homicidal maniac”. Of course there are lots of diversions and sub-plots that the reader sometimes loses track of the main story line. The novel attacks many things: slavery, racism, commercial greed, jingoism, ecology, capitalism, imperialism, overpopulation etc., all of these aimed precisely at modern American society.

Two important implications of metafiction are;

- 1- Questioning the relationship between fiction and reality
- 2- The role of author in the text that he has written

One of the major tools of metafiction for questioning the relationship between fiction and reality is foregrounding the role of language in the construction of what is usually considered as reality. In other words, language that has been a *means* in realist and modernist fiction here becomes and *end*. The individual in realist fiction is always integrated into the social structure, and in Modernist literature s/he is always in opposition to the social traditions. But

...the power structures of contemporary society are more diverse or more effectively concealed or mystified, creating a greater problem for the post-modernist novelist in identifying and then representing the object of opposition...(Vonnegut, 1972: 10).

Metafiction writers by turning inwards to their own medium of expression have found a solution to this problem. By doing this they can examine the relationship between social reality and fictional form. In fact, metafictional novels suggest that by setting the mirror of art to its own linguistic structures the authors can get a better result than their predecessors who had directly set this mirror to the so called “human nature” that somehow exists as an

“essence” outside the systems of language. For metafictional writers, the basic assumption is that composing a novel is not basically different from composing or constructing one’s reality. Since all of us are embedded within the language, metafiction writers try to examine the process of making a world and thereby making what others consider as reality. In this regard history can not have the meaning that it had before and consequently becomes provisional. It becomes another form of narrative that may not have a one to one relationship with the facts. What we read under the name of official history may not be a report of the actual incidents of the past but a selection of what historians have considered suitable for others to read.

Breakfast of Champions (1972) has a large amount of illustrations by Vonnegut himself. These illustrations, apart from their major role in the context of the novel are meant to weaken the novel’s dependence on language. However taken out of context, they can hardly have the meaning that they have *inside* the novel and beside the words on the page. One of Vonnegut’s major reasons for using these illustrations is implying that other means of communication can hardly take the place of language and it is definitely impossible to get out of the prison-house of language.

Vonnegut’s other purpose from drawing these illustrations has been to show the sense of absurdity; his realization that “I have no culture” (Ibid: 15) and “I can’t live without a culture anymore.” (Ibid). Vonnegut’s critique of the contemporary American culture could not have its present effect, if this novel had been other than metafictional. Because after all, Vonnegut himself is a part of the same culture and it is impossible to criticize an established institution from *within*. Metafiction allows Vonnegut to distance himself from his contemporary culture and have a better overview of the disadvantages of being an American. Breakfast of Champions also inverts the conventions of science-fiction; in this novel contemporary American society is the “alien world”. Vonnegut, by using an ex-Earthling narrator who is now living on a different planet and has set out to explain earth to his fellow inhabitants, defamiliarizes the world that his readers have always taken for granted.

In Slaughterhouse-five(1969), Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the novel, accidentally has to share a room with a Harvard History Professor named Bertram Copeland Rumfoord in the hospital. Rumfoord is working “on a one volume history of the United Stated Army Air Corps in world War Two” (Ibid: 184). Also Rumfoord is “a retired brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve, the official Air Force Historian, a full professor, the author of twenty-six books”¹ - (Ibid).

Rumfoord is supposed to write a “condensation” of the twenty-seven-volume Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two. But he can not find anything about the fire-bombing of Dresden in twenty seven volumes of that book. Here Vonnegut openly foregrounds the role of historians in making the history. Dresden has had more casualties than the atomic bombs, and it has also been the seat of a real catastrophe, but merely because some people have labeled this event as “top secret”, they have tried to eliminate the fire-bombing of Dresden by not bringing it in the official history book. With all these Vonnegut can not claim that his account of this event is at the same time objective, and especially as this event is seen

through the eyes of Billy Pilgrim, it can be said that this event is as real as Tralfamadore and even Vonnegut's own presence in the novel can not give the reader any more hints about that. However this fictional world is made of the words and sentences, and this is the same tool that one has to write the history or omit something from that. Such a doubtful view toward what has been rendered as "reality", makes us doubt the authenticity of what is called "official history" too. Moreover, Vonnegut wants the readers to learn an important lesson about history: history is nothing but human construct and it is as fictional as a novel.

The next major implication of metafiction refers to the problematic role of the author in such novels. The Author in a metafictional novel loses his privileged position and almost becomes powerless, As Patricia Waugh suggests, in the realist tradition, especially in the case of nineteenth-century realism, the authorial power is generally "derived from a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world of history." (Waugh, 1984: 6). Therefore, for Waugh, the forms of fiction, and the conflict of languages and voices, are "resolved through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, god-like author" (Ibid). According to Waugh, the god-like power of the author over the text refers to "the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence" (Ibid: 7).

Whereas the realistic novelists regard the external world as objective truth, the modernist is concerned "with the mind as itself the basis of an aesthetic, ordered at a profound level and revealed to consciousness at isolated 'epiphanic' moments" (Ibid: 23). Although readers will receive an "open ending" in a modernist fiction such as A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (1916) the "conflicts of open ending will always be resolved" (Lodge, 1977: 224-8). Waugh supports Lodge's idea by suggesting that "in modernist fiction, the reader may be temporarily dislocated when point of view is shifted, but is allowed to reorient him or herself to the new perspective and recontextualize each new piece of discourse" (Waugh, 1984: 101). One good example of this shift of narrative perspective is the technique of "stream of consciousness": the author is powerful in penetrating the inner world of the characters and providing the reader with some kind of vision. Thus, in both the realistic and modernistic tradition, the author dominates over the fictional world, whether it be external or psychological, also he has absolute control over its meaning, and functions as the source to offer solutions to the problems in the novel and the meanings to the objective world. However in postmodernist texts, the author loses his god-like authority over the text. In most of these novels the author enters his own text in order to show his authority to his characters in a direct way, however as soon as he crosses the boundary of the real world into the fictional world he becomes a fictional character too and consequently loses all his authorial power.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut is the omniscient narrator of the text and also a fictional writer figure in the text. Thus, the god-like position of the author in the text is challenged. For instance, the stories of Billy Pilgrim being unstuck in time and his experiences in the Second World War and the planet Tralfamadore are intruded upon by the author. When Billy is experiencing the tragic moment of the dying of the colonel, Wild Bob,

Vonnegut interrupts it by reminding the reader that "...I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare..."(Vonnegut, 1969: 67). When Billy eyewitnesses the American soldiers' sickness in the latrine, the scene is shattered by an interruption: "...An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. ...That was I. That was the author of this book..."(Ibid: 125). On Billy's way to Dresden, Vonnegut breaks into the movement by associating the scene with his experiences in the Second World War: "...Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, 'Oz.' That was I. That was me..."(Ibid: 148).

In Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut as the author of the book actually turns himself into one of the "main" characters in his novel. He converses with his characters as he creates them and tells the stories of his own life. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut does turn himself into the character "I," but most of the time, the Vonnegut persona stays out of the narrative as the third-person narrator of the story. However, in Breakfast of Champions, the existence of the authorial voice and the development of the characters are mutually dependent. The characters need the author as much as the author needs his characters in the text. Vonnegut challenges the author's dominance over the text because the authorial intrusions undermine the omniscient power of the author as in Slaughterhouse-Five. The strategy of narrative intrusion is even more frequently used in Breakfast of Champions. Moreover, it is not only done in the form of intrusion, but actually through the author as a character. This strategy reveals the author's daily life and personal problems. For example, some factual information in the ordinary life of the author disrupts the fictional world he is creating: "...Patty Keene hadn't heard the big news yet. Neither had Dwayne, Neither had Kilgore Trout. I only found out about it the day before yesterday..."(Ibid: 137). Or "...I do not know who invented the body bag. I do know who invented Kilgore Trout. I did..."(Ibid: 39). Also, the story is intruded upon through the association of the figures in real life and the fictional characters: "...Bunny's mother ate Drano. My mother ate sleeping pills, which wasn't nearly as horrible..."(Ibid: 70). Moreover, the intrusion goes further as the narrator turns himself into one of the characters whose stories are largely revealed and intermingled with the other characters in the novel. The author surrogate enters into the text and also has interaction with them: "...I had come to the Arts Festival incognito. I was there to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout..."(Ibid: 179).

3. Conclusion

In both novels, with the act of narrative intrusion, the identity of the author becomes doubled, fictitious and trivialized, and thus, compared to the author in realistic or modernist narrative tradition, their omniscient and omnipotent power is greatly reduced. As Waugh points out clearly,

...the author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her 'real' identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it, is that his or her own reality is also called into question...The 'author' discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text...(Waugh, 1984: 133).

While the author breaks the borderline between the creator and the created by descending from his superior position and entering the very text he is composing, he is not only questioning the god-like power of the realistic author but also breaking the narrative coherence and the structural control by the act of authorial intrusion. Thus, authorial intrusion makes the author powerless in terms of the author's position in the text and structural control over text.

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