

Kurt vonnegut and postmodern humor



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John Gardner, for example, attacked existentialism in *Greened*. Several critics, though, misread the novel and viewed the narrator and the author as having the same worldview. Because he did not establish a moral norm from which to work, he was misunderstood. Opponent, however, did not assume that there is a common set of values held by their readers. Instead, he laid out a moral base from which to work from within the work itself. Postmodern humor is often characterized as rebelling against the norms of literature and trying to subvert them with no motivation other than pleasure.

In *Circus of the*

Mind In Motion, Lance Olsen shows the purpose of postmodern humor to be revolutionary in its motivation. Using *Decamp* as an illustration of the motivation behind postmodern art (writing included), Olsen writes that “*Decamp* had no intention of improving or even changing the critics’ minds. Rather, his impulse was to subvert a power structure for no other reason than the pleasure of subverting a power structure” (18). Olsen takes this idea farther to do away with any authority and any final interpretation the reader may hope to gather; instead, “the impetus of postmodern humor is to disarm pomposity and power.

The postmodern creator becomes aesthetic and metaphysical terrorist, a foreplay in a universe of intellectuality where no one text has any more or less authority than any other” (18). This lack of authority causes the idea of a final authorial position to be radically thrown into question: “The audience often senses a complexity and subtlety of tone, but because the postmodern

creator manipulates a system of private instead of public norms, his or hers hairsplitting remains uncertain.

.. Because of this, his or her text exists to be interpreted in radically different, even contradictory, waves” (18).

While Else’s theory destroys all sense of a final meaning, Harry Levin proposes a different view of how one interprets humor. In *Playboys and Killjoys*, Levin proposes that there is a basis that the author draws upon in humor, especially in satire: “ Every satirist, negative though he may sound, must project his guided missiles from a launching-pad of belief (196). What Levin attempts to do here is to illustrate how the satirist creates a set of public norms, as Olsen describes them, by taking his or her private norms and declaring them openly.

This approach would be akin to Swifts beginning “ A Modest Proposal” with some sort of another, morally wrong. He would not even have to do this didactically, but he would have to convey it clearly in order to create a public norm the reader would react to. Olsen, however, argues that there is no “ launching-pad of belief anymore; he argues that college freshmen misread “ A Modest Proposal” because we live in a world where “ in fact a portion of the global population did believe it right to kill children and turn them into lampshades and gloves” (86-87).

However, this approach presupposes that the students in these classes believe that eating children is a moral norm somewhere in the world. Instead, all of my students argue that Swift needs some sort of counseling or punishment, showing that they still do rely on moral norms in their reading.

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In fact, they believe in these norms so strongly that they cannot imagine anyone suggesting we break them, even satirically, which is why they actually misread Swift.

However, Leonard Fingers shows other difficulties that arise when one argues that satire relies on moral norms for its effectiveness: " The assumption that satire relies on moral norms is so widely accepted that one hesitates to challenge it. But moral norms are not easy to define. Many satirists consider their work moral even when it contradicts the satire of other writers who also call themselves moralists" (9). Fingers, however, does admit that satire relies on some type of norm when he writes, " Of course satire relies on norms.

The moment one criticizes and says that something has been done in the wrong way, he is implying that there is a right way to do it" (11). Levin argues that the satirist can persuade his or her reader that something is wrong with an idea and then satirized that idea, thus creating his or her own moral norm: Yet the satirist must convince his audience that, when meeting is rotten or someone goes astray, there has been a departure from a certain ethos. It is simpler for him when the norms of that ethos have already been accepted by convention.

Otherwise, it becomes a part of his Job to inculcate those norms - in other words, to preach to the unconverted. He 49 must be hortatory before he can wax sardonic, like Bernard Shaw in the prefaces to his plays.

(197) In Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Opponent establishes his moral norm by showing the outcome of Billy Pilgrim's philosophy in relation to the bombing

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of Dressed and the Germans' massacre of the Jews. Billy Pilgrim learns his philosophy of passive acceptance from the Transformational, aliens who capture him.

They teach him that one should not look for reasons why things happen; he or she should simply allow them to happen. When Billy asks, " How -? how did I get here? " they respond, " It would take another Earthling to explain it to you.

Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Transformational, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change.

It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is" (85-86).

Since everything simply is, one does not question what happens or believe the Transformational say, " We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Transformational test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears. " Billy responds, " If you know this... Isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button? " The Transformational guide answers, " He has always pressed it, and he always will.

We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way" (116-117). This philosophy denies the human capability to prevent any event. Wayne McGinnis comments concerning the Transformational philosophy, " Their little formula ' so it goes' said ritualistically throughout

the novel whenever death, no matter how trivial, is mentioned, is from the human point of view, the height of fatalism” (116). By merely accepting the end of the universe and any other catastrophe, they deny the human potential for change.

Opponent ridicules this idea by correcting the Transformational view to the views of those who defend the bombing of Dresden. When Billy is in the hospital after a plane crash, he shares a room with Professor Rumford, who is writing a book on the bombing of Dresden. Rumford tells Billy, “ It had to be done,” which echoes the Transformational view of the end of the universe. Billy accepts this justification because of the philosophy he learned from the Transformational: “ It was all right.

.. Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does.

I learned that on Tradition” (18).

Critics’ neglect of this connection leads to misinterpretation, as Merrill 50 points out when he writes, “ The interpretive problem with Slaughterhouses is roughly the same as with the books already discussed. The objective evidence of the text is supposed to persuade us that the Transformational philosophy, as reflected in such characters as General Rumford, is humanly unacceptable” (178). Evenson’s paralleling of Rumford defense of the bombing of Dresden with the quietism practiced by Billy shows the outcome of the Transformational philosophy.

Opponent further mocks the idea of unquestioning acceptance by connecting the Transformational philosophy with the philosophy of the Germans.

When Billy is taken aboard the Transformational spaceship, he asks, “ Why me? ” The Transformational respond, “ That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr.. Pilgrim. Why you’ll Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is.

Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?... Well, here we are Mr.. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment.

There is no why” (76-77).

This exchange parallels a scene that takes place in a German prison camp. One of the American soldiers makes a comment that a guard does not like; the guard then knocks out two of the American’s teeth. The American asks the guard, “ Why me? ” The guard responds, “ Ivy you? W anybody? ” (91).

This type of unquestioning acceptance of the status quo leads to a bombing of Dressed or to a laughter of the Jews, and it is this type of philosophy to which Opponent is opposed. Opponent further criticizes Billy’s philosophy by presenting him as self-deluded and possibly insane.

When Billy commits himself to a mental institution, he meets Eliot Rosewater, who is trying to deal with the same problem Billy has: what they had seen in the war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes.

And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dressed... So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. 101) Rosewater tells Billy at one point that everything there

was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, adding “ But that isn’t enough any more” (101).

Later, Billy hears Rosewater tell the psychiatrist, “ I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people aren’t going to want to go on living” (101).

As Merrill points out, “ Like John] Gardner, Opponent creates a sympathetic protagonist who adopts a deterministic philosophy in order to make sense out of life’s apparent randomness” (177). Billy, therefore, tries to develop new lies to live his life; but in his attempt, he creates the Transformational and their philosophy.

Billy develops the Transformational through Kilgore Trout, a science fiction author whose books Rosewater collects and allows Billy to read while in the hospital. One of these books was *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, which was about “ people whose mental diseases couldn’t be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn’t see those causes at all, or even imagine them” (104). One of the Transformational’ teachings was that many things, such as other genders, exist in the Ruth dimension.

Another Kilgore Trout book that influenced his Transformational experience was *The Big Board*.

, which was “ about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrial. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212” (201). Billy is supposedly captured by the Transformational and put on

display in a zoo with a woman named Montana Wildcat. His development of the Transformational is a self-defense mechanism to deal with the horrors he saw at the bombing of Dresden. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been misinterpreted by critics who argue that Opponent is advocating a passive stance in view of the horrors of the world.

For example, Robert W. Pushup writes, “ To put it another way: people, including Kurt Opponent, Jar. , are free to self-actuality but they must never expect such self-actualization to alter, fundamentally, the covers of human history” (167). Robert Merrill points out this misinterpretation when he comments, “ Even such excellent critics as Alfred Akin and Tony Tanner have agreed that ‘ The main idea emerging from *Slaughterhouse- Five* seems to be that the proper response to life is one of the rejected acceptance'” (178). Merrill goes on to add.

As it happens, however, our problems in reading Greened [by John Gardner] are very similar to our difficulties in reading such recent affiliations as John Barth’s *77? A Floating Opera* (1956), Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut’s books in this mode. For reasons I will discuss later, modern evaluators have tended to produce works in which it is essential that we perceive the errors of their basically sympathetic protagonists. If we fail to note these errors, or if we interpret them inappropriately, we are in danger not only of misconstruing the author’s meaning but of actually reversing it. (162)

The reason for this misinterpretation is that critics believe that Billy Pilgrim’s attitudes are synonymous with Vonnegut’s; however, Opponent distances

himself from Pilgrim by showing the hazards of Pilgrim's philosophy and by presenting Pilgrim as a questionable, if not unreliable, narrator. Another reason that Slaughterhouse-Five has been misinterpreted results from a comment that Opponent makes in the opening chapter.

He relates a conversation he had about Slaughterhouse-Five: Over the years, people I've met have often asked me what I'm working on, and I've usually replied that the main thing was a book about Dressed.

I said that to Harrison Starr, the movie-maker, one time, and he raised his eyebrows and inquired, "Is it an anti-war book?" "Yes," I said, "I guess." "You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?" "No. What do you say, Harrison Star?" "I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?'" What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death.

3-4) This interchange has been seen as a confirmation of the passive acceptance of wars and other such atrocities; however, Opponent is merely viewing the situation realistically. Opponent has certainly done this in many of his other works and speeches. In an address to the graduating class of Pennington College in 1970, he said, "I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I'm sorry - I have to undo that now."

I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fluffier or the flirtation of the grandest dreams of God almighty” (163). As John May writes, “ There is, it seems to me, considerable evidence that Opponent would steer us from one course of action because he has something better in mind, although there is a marked inclination to dwell on the limitations of the possibilities before us.

His tendency to limit the humanly possible so severely is, in fact, an almost desperate plea to the reader to avoid the destructively quixotic” (123).

Opponent knows that one book is not going to end wars, and even if it did, there would still be death. This recognition of the effects of satire is reminiscent of Jonathan Swifts comment in the letter from Captain Gultier to his cousin Sampson at the beginning of Guilder’s Travels: “ And so it hath proved; for instead of seeing a full Stop put to all Abuses and Corruptions, at least in this little Island, as I had Reason to expect: Behold, after six Months Warning, I cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine Intentions..

. (viii). Opponent, like Swift, realizes that change will not come in six months, or even more, based on one book. Instead, change happens in individuals long before it happens in societies. John May supports this view: “ We may not be able, Opponent is saying, to undo the harm that has been done, but we can certainly love, simply because they are people, those who have been made useless by our past stupidity and greed, our previous crimes against our brothers. And if that seems insane, then the better the world for such folly” (125).

Opponent encourages local action, rather than hoping that society will change in a short period of time. Not only does he encourage pacifism, he practices it in relation to his own family. In the opening chapter he writes, “ I have told my sons 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. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that” (19).

Even if no one is changed by this book, Opponent promises to try to pass his peaceful philosophy on to his children. He seems to have succeeded at least at this: His son, Mark, is a doctor; his oldest daughter, Edith, is an artist, as is his second daughter, Nanette.

Evensong’s message in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not ambivalent, as Olsen argues concerning postmodern humor; instead, the reader must read carefully to separate Billy Pilgrim-Mozart Opponent.

Opponent even clearly states his viewpoint in opposition to Pilgrim in the last chapter of the book when he says, “ If what Billy Pilgrim learned-emote Transformational is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed” (211). If it is taken out of context, Billy Pilgrim’s viewpoint could be seen as that of Opponent; however, when one examines the connections between Pilgrim’s views and those of the Germans and the supporters of the bombing of Dresden, Evensong’s message of working toward peace becomes evident.

The problem Opponent faced in 1969 with Slaughterhouse-Five is one that continues to plague both writers and readers.

Readers are hesitant to accept any writer's view of the world as true; thus, the writers must establish the view of the world they are taking. In so doing, the reader knows what to expect, preparing the way for norms that can be used to satirized differing opinions. Otherwise, misreading, such as what happened with many critics who commented on Slaughterhouse-Five and Greened, will continue to happen.