

Post modern literary theory



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The essay encompasses a contrast and comparison of the two novels “Slaughterhouse Five” by Kurt Vonnegut and “Catch-22” by Joseph Heller. This essay majorly focuses on the application of Post-modern literary theory in the two novels. According to the literature, post-modern literary theory is based on the premise of assertion that learning has no particular goal associated with it. Kilgore, for instance, stresses that knowledge is fragmented and multifaceted in nature to the extent that it cannot be regarded as being rational. Accordingly, the essence of knowledge can easily undergo a paradigm shift especially when the knower’s perspective changes. Typically, the idea of postmodernism denotes the cultural shifts that occur with time. Ideally, this concept can best be understood on the basis of cultural shifts of the international community especially in regards to the conventional way of reading literature. This essay critically looks at the manner in which the conventional literary chronology has been ignored, the unusual characterization, thematic concerns as well as use of irony and repetition as the center stage.

Non-chronological Style

The distinctive element of non-chronological style is clearly depicted in the two novels. This is a type of style whereby the events forming the storyline are described haphazardly from different stand points of different characters. This is often done in a non-sequential manner such that time line slowly appears as the plot of the story as it develops. For instance, the story in “Catch 22” could be divided into several sections with regards to the development of the plot. The first set of chapters from one to eleven generally incorporate the fragmented parts of the story albeit in historical

period of around 1943. The second set of chapters ranging from chapter twelve to chapter twenty give a flashback of the “ Great Siege of Bologna” before making a quick about turn to 1943 that serves as the “ present moment” in third set of chapters, twenty one to twenty five. Moreover, the fourth set of chapters goes a further step by focusing on a flashback of the emergence of Milo’s syndicate. Furthermore, the fifth set makes another return to 1943 while focusing on retaining the previous tones before getting the story into the sixth and final set of chapters. This final set of chapters keeps a keen focus on the brutal nature of war as related to human life. That is the most prominent chapter in the novel “ Catch 22” (Heller, 1941). On the other hand, the novel “ Slaughterhouse Five” incorporates more of the same element as it’s not told in conventional chronological way either. This is seen in life of the main character Billy Pilgrim whose life rotates as he travels between the year 1945, then in 1968 and lastly in 1954. Accordingly, the novel narrates the events that took place during the World War II where Billy served as a junior soldier of the United States Army. The young soldier was ruthlessly captured by the Germans then taken to Dresden, a city that remained immune to the effects of war. Even after eventually escaping and becoming a successful businessman, he kept making a reference to his life back when he was kidnapped. This completely gives the story a new dimension in as far as chronology is concerned (Vonnegut, 1982).

Characterization

The wide cast of characters in the novel “ Catch 22” by Heller serves a great purpose in making the story memorable. Ideally, the reader gets a stronger perception of the “ catch” from the unusual experiences of individual

characters. For instance, Milo Minderbinder and General Peckem are typical representatives of bureaucracy among the military personnel. The author thus attempts to portray these characters as the exemplification of how the military operates. The two men are quite ruthless and inhuman in their dealings with their inferiors, something that draws the reader to think that they don't really consider them as men but rather tools that they should use in pursuit of career excellence. Milo, for example, uses his manipulative powers over his junior officers to improve his personal wealth. As such, his actions give an impression that economic structure and to some extent the ethical system embodied by army men are of a greater significance than the sanctity of human life. On the other hand, General Peckem is portrayed to represent the extreme extent of stupidity as can be personified in military hierarchy. Ideally, this way of characterization speaks much louder about the author opposition to bureaucracy in the army (Joseph, 1941). In the novel "Slaughterhouse Five" by Kurt Vonnegut, the character Billy Pilgrim portrays extreme level of irony. Billy grew up as a weakling personality only preferring to swim most of the time. That is why it became more of a joke when he joins the army to become a soldier. In fact, he initially joins the army merely as the chaplain's assistant. However, with the passing of time he abruptly thrusts himself into armed conflict during the "Battle of the Bulge". By the end of this conflict, he survives to the amazement of every other military personnel. They wonder how an inexperienced coward in inappropriate clothing would escape unscathed where so many people with more appropriate provisions perish. It is quite noticeable that a far reaching thematic concern has been achieved simply through the choice of characters. The reader generally assumes that military men are people of

extraordinary courage and gusto. But the author opposes this generalization by using Billy to show that behind the generalization there are very cowardly elements. Conventionally, this would be achieved through the inclusion of the said theme in the plot of the novel. However, the author has broken from the conventional rule by choosing to use characters to reveal these aspects of the storyline (Vonnegut, 1982).

The postmodern literary skills are displayed in the novel "Slaughterhouse Five" from a third person story telling style. For instance, most of the experiences that touched on Billy's life are narrated in the third person without any direct reference from the author who plays the role of a first person narrator elsewhere in the story. On a similar note, the author directs our thoughts of Billy through the characters he associates Billy with. As such, it becomes hard for the reader to directly link any kind of behavior or character trait to Billy. For example, the comparison that the author adopts with regard to Billy as being skinny and his colleague Weary as being fat clearly depict what he really means about them. The reader cannot fail to recognize that the author meant to say that Billy is quite vulnerable while Weary has become a spoiled kid (Vonnegut, 1982). Conversely, the situations outlined in the novels serve to a great extent in revealing inner feelings of the characters. This is a break from the classic literature where the author explicitly states these feelings or uses another character to reveal them. For instance, in the novel "Catch 22", Yossarian has to endure a life of nightmare especially with the existence of violence and untold bureaucracy within the forces. The events around his personal rebellion give an impression that he is a military officer with big feelings of humanity.

According to him, they have become resources in the eyes of their extraordinarily ambitious superior military officers. This is seen in the idea of colonels frequently increasing the number of military missions they have to accomplish before their contracts are terminated. As such, the superiors make their departure from the army back to their homes a great illusion. Yossarian becomes a man quite furious with the direction that his life is taking and remains unchanged by the worsening national ideals of their time. Indeed, he has a strong desire to live and so spends a great deal of his time faking sickness in the hospital in an attempt to avoid war. These are not typical of any literary work in modern set up. It's clearly a break from the norm whereby the author takes more direct means to reveal the character traits or inner feelings of the characters (Heller, 1941).