

# Postmodernism: extraordinarily ordinary stories



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Can fiction, when challenged beyond the boundaries of logic, ever develop into reality? Post-modernist thinking is a way of manipulating the beliefs and concepts that shape literature, but even more so the typical methods of storytelling. Instead of structuring ideas around utter fiction, it takes ideas designed around abstract philosophies, actual aspects of life and the universe, then develops them into fictitious accounts, allowing for the reader to broaden thought into something greater than the isolation of mere explicit textual meaning. Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show* revolutionized postmodernism by doing precisely this, uniquely designing erratic structures in which the stories are told, as well as placing a conflict of ideas between the reader or viewer. These works pointedly interrogate what the main protagonist is facing, doing, and thinking; this tactic leads to a conceptualization that reaches far beyond the depth of a modernist novel and, arguably, beyond the impact of other post-modern pieces.

*The Truman Show* opens a window looking out at an observation on the fascination with the ordinary, and the submission of our modern culture to succumb by many means to the digital age of media attention. The film takes grasp on an image of present-day society and entralls it with the basic concept of daily life, an occurrence of which one could easily surround themselves with in actuality, but instead utilizes its energy by feeding off of watching others endure reality for them. In the case of the film, the lab rat enduring this phenomenon would be the main protagonist, Truman Burbank. He is a naive man, unknowing of the world around him and unaware to the case of his situation, yet still pursues a quest to discover the greater world

(Seahaven Island) around him; Truman constantly embarks on a journey within himself to find answers to life, which reflects a heavy aptitude for postmodernist thought. A crucial moment in which this is visually portrayed in the film is when Truman sets sail away from Seahaven Island and eventually reaches the "sky". This moment is representative of the universal curiosity among humanity to discover what normality truly is, and reveals the key flaw in the "perfection" of Seahaven Island, which is that no matter what, one thing that can not be fully manipulated is the human mind. Thoughts are never preventative, which is exactly what leads to Truman's eventual escape from his caged life.

Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* shares this same sort of conceptualization by placing its main protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, in a constant battle with time, and struggle with attempting to find his belonging among the phases of it so he can also try to discover the meaning of life, or how it's supposed to genuinely be lived. It proposes a level of escapism, offering vital commentary on humanity as it rests, as well as could potentially develop. There is a pinpointed insight on how perfection is defined by society, which is seen through the incorporation of Billy's journey through time to Times Square where he goes shopping in a store with novels by Kilgore Trout on display, only to act as a facade to the societal obsession with the unaccepted parts of public society. This signifies how society views Billy as an outlier when he really is the most normal one with a grasp on reality in that store as nearly all the others are delving into woolgatherings; Billy is criticized by one of the workers, and told "' That ain't what you want, for Christ's sake'" (Vonnegut 260), when holding one of the only few actual novels in the place.

Within this statement, is implicit postmodern commentary on modern trends, since society seems to invest itself into other people's lives such as that of Montana Wildhack's and does not read for the sake of a good story anymore, but rather for entertainment, a society that is not only doomed by Capitalist media consumption/addiction, but also is paralleled perfectly to that of Truman Burbank's life...let alone our own current society, too.

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon described the types of conditions under which both Billy Pilgrim and Truman Burbank, debatably, even our own selves live under, as the quintessence of postmodern culture. She postulates that the crucial elements that are nearly always present in this type of consumerist society are a world dominated by the logic of capitalism, which has no regard for the rights of oppressed laborers or the ravagement of the natural world, a culture dominated by simulacra and spatial representations (ie screens, monitors, ads, etc.) that sever our former sense of history, and a growing sole reliance on technology as a crutch for knowledge which feeds into society's expanding sense of unease and our separation from the real and natural world. Overall, when connecting this vision of society into what Vonnegut and Weir are both aiming to portray, it is to emphasize that as others invest their escape from normality into an even more unvarying lifestyle by turning to technology, an impalpable world...Billy and Truman both share and constantly contemplate a key question that distinguish the purpose of their stories from the others: What rests beyond the tangible life we lead?

It is exactly this question that makes the lives of both Truman and Billy so fascinating as a reader or viewer. Humanity as a whole is engulfed with <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-extraordinarily-ordinary-stories/>

curiosity, which is why the term “innovation” has become so renowned for the progression of our spans of existence. Whether or not one personally delves into it is the division, since there are only few who decide to take a leap toward finding answers...they may be referred to as crazy or seen as such in our eyes as Billy Pilgrim was by many of those he encountered, but they are who move time forward toward the next great developments of life. They push boundaries that would otherwise never be expanded, which is why the Tralfamadorians are obsessed with Billy, just as society is with Truman’s televised life. Behind Billy’s outward insanity, we are told that his “listlessness concealed a mind which was fizzing and flashing thrillingly. It was preparing letters and lectures about the flying saucers, the negligibility of death, and the true nature of time” (Vonnegut 243). These beings actually experience life for what it is, rather than escape from it toward some intangible artificial experience. Truman’s director and “creator”, Christof, describes the fascination precisely, opening the film by accentuating, “While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, there’s nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn’t always Shakespeare, but it’s genuine. It’s a life” (Weir, *The Truman Show*).

Another concept present in both Weir’s film and Vonnegut’s novel is the postmodern idea shaped in a theory developed by Baudrillard in 1970, when Baudrillard had distinguished himself from the Marxist theory of revolution, and instead postulated the possibility of revolt against the consumer society in an “unforeseeable but certain” form. In other words, it was that the obsession with a type of utopian society and neo-generational world surrounded by facades of human evolution, would eventually create the

downfall of society itself. We see this obsession present in society's outlook on the "perfect" life that is portrayed in Truman Burbank's televised story, and also through Vonnegut's reaction upon the initial arrival to Dresden, which would eventually be set ablaze killing 130,000 people. "Somebody behind him [Billy] in the boxcar said, 'Oz.' That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana" (Vonnegut 189). It is Vonnegut's included reaction that acts as a paradox to what is known to occur in the future fate of Dresden. Although the city was made into a mechanized machine, surrounded with architectural history and endeavour, as well as inhabitants that had nothing to even consider worrying about in regards to the war, it ended up collapsing exactly because of that. The city was set to ruin because it did fit into the category of a picturesque consumer society. In addition to this postulate, however, the experience Billy and the other POWs had in Dresden formed around another popular postmodern philosophy labeled in Baudrillard's book, *The Consumer Society*, in which he comments on the process of social homogenization, alienation, and exploitation. He argues that these processes "constitute a process of reification in commodities, technologies, and things ("objects") that come to dominate people ("subjects") divesting them of their human qualities and capacities" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*). This philosophized idea proves evident throughout both pieces as we see that humans lose touch with their true selves and lives once *The Truman Show* becomes a worldwide phenomenon as a sort of reality TV show. And in the case of Vonnegut's story, it is seen through Billy's experience on Tralfamadore when the typical zoo display for humans, was composed almost all of consumer items and

objects...which led Billy to cherish his humanity along with Montana much more.

Billy Pilgrim and Truman Burbank are very similar as character parallels to one another, since both are very whimsical, and displaced into a life enthralled with achieving discovery of their purposes in it. For Truman it involves attempting to discover his life as something tangible, and not just simply a life getting scripted and filmed for viewers of the actual world to find distasteful pleasure out of; as for Billy, it involves him attempting to discover the purpose of his role in the war when we're thrust into his period of becoming a POW, as well as his attempt at discovering where he truly belongs in time, as he is constantly jumping between eras...even planets, when he has moments of glimpses through what Kilgore Trout called, "time-windows". Both are truly trapped in sole moments, not a tangible life. But this where they develop into outliers and embark on their stories to break away from their isolation, or moments of being stuck. Billy and Truman eventually succeed at this and break away from getting trapped; " Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had on him. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly" (Vonnegut 226). A certain depth of this is described in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, since Vonnegut grants us many portals into introspection through placing his protagonist in this dilemma of time and space. We are left to the genius of observation through not only the eyes of the character, but also through the self-reflection as a reader once we are introduced to the Tralfamadorians and their answer to the concept of time and what it actually is. " All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations.

It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber" (Vonnegut 109). There truly is no such thing as free-will, since we are trapped in the progression of time by moments, just as Truman is through his moments getting treated and dissected as scenes of the TV show he is confined in. By the end, we are left to question whether or not time truly even does exist, or is it simply a creation on our behalf to avoid life and fool ourselves into thinking we have free-will, when in reality humanity has anything but.

Ultimately, when deciphering both Slaughterhouse-Five and The Truman Show utilizing the theories and ideas surrounding postmodernist ideals, we can see that both tales are composed of fiction, however, it is also ascertained that much of what is philosophized could become, or already be actuality. Both Vonnegut and Weir challenge the odds of what is typical for telling a story, creating something that is not just impactful, but also lasting; one questions the life they lead and live upon concluding both of the pieces. We are all left wondering whether we are just pawns to a greater scheme than life, pondering if what the Tralfamadorians said is the truth of reality: "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" (Vonnegut 112).

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