Carnival Rhetoric in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Chien-chi Liu

Vonnegut's works are characterized by the playful narrative style, which typically features parodies, running gags, wordplay, and lowbrow jokes. Most critical opinions on *Slaughterhouse-Five* have been devoted to the strain of black humor, postmodernism, or metafiction. The purpose of this paper, however, is to shift such critical inquiries and to combine ideological and aesthetic criticism. In my reading of this work, I shall apply Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization so as to get a full understanding of Vonnegut's carnival rhetoric, verbal-ideological system, and his subversive impulse.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* combines the horrors of war with the fantastic escapism of science fiction. The central event of the work is the wartime fire-bombing of the city of Dresden, Germany, during World War II, while the hero, Billy Pilgrim, was a prisoner there. It is worth noting that Vonnegut's incorporation of science fiction stratagems into realistic fiction plays down the realistic in order to incorporate the fantastic. His attempt in this work involves a desire, as the narrator puts it, to re-invent himself and his universe with the big help of science fiction and to generate "fictions which both defamiliarize and reconstruct" (Bradbury 169). As Lundquist indicates, "The science fiction as a type of writing... represents an approach to a definition of man and his status in the universe that accords nicely with Vonnegut's own attitudes" (87). Much American fiction in the 1960s, characterized by close affiliations with the counter-culture, "becomes fantastic through its assault on the historical and the real" (Bradbury 159) and reacts against all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, conventions, and prohibitions. Thus, *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals Vonnegut's nonconformism, a carnival desire to subvert and demonstrate the falsity or absurdity of historically instituted ideologies, as well as his impulse to dissolve the solidarity of the world through the freedoms of imagination. In Bakhtin's terms, he posits a carnivalesque world-view hostile to established authority or ruling ideologies but ultimately promulgates his own form of authority by creating a carnival rhetoric or counter-ideology.

"Carnivalization" is a term Bakhtin uses to describe the shaping effect of carnival on literary genres. The term implies the systematic parody of systems and points to the arbitrariness and authoritativeness of all norms, rules and conventions. The carnivalesque literary form, studded with the carnival spirit—to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from cliches, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 34)—, embodies relativism, many-voicedness, parody and utopian vision. An essential feature in such a literary form is "an application of carnivalization to the portrayal of contemporary reality and contemporary everyday life" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 158). In
Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut, through the persona (a narrator with a personality all his own), depicts his strong feelings about the nightmarish Dresden holocaust, his comments on the contemporary ideologies that support the historical framework, his discussions on the meanings of life and the universe in which he finds himself, his attitude toward a capitalistic, politically greedy, militaristic, money-grabbing society, and especially a constant longing for a utopian world: the planet Tralfamadore, which represents paradise and offers an alternative to Earth and Earthlings. Such a utopian world, according to Bakhtin, is a carnivalized world "opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability" (Bakhtin, Rabelais 11). Rife with carnival images, carnivallistic laughter, and carnivalized episodes, Slaughterhouse-Five manifests itself as a means for Vonnegut to visualize the world and man and to comprehend the contemporary reality.

Vonnegut's carnival impulse stems from his desire to demolish and highlight the absurd values of conventionally bonded voices. Like other novelists in the Sixties, he celebrates "an unpatterned, resistant awareness to history, system, and code" (Bradbury 157). Thus, his embarking on a new way of writing is a striking evidence of literary subversion. Slaughterhouse-Five, with its non-linear time scheme and its complex interweaving of science-fiction fantasy and the realities of World War II, "creates a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text" (Klinkowitz, Kurt Vonnegut 69). Such a reconnection assorts with the carnivalesque perception, which

establishes a dialogic interaction between oppositions, not so much in order to abolish what differentiates these oppositions one from the other, but rather to dispute the social hierarchization which maintains their isolation and separation from one another. (Malczynski 51)

Slaughterhouse-Five thus undermines repressive assumptions of order and reflects the anti-authoritarian impulse which generated much of American 1960s culture (Klinkowitz, Literary Subversions xv). As a matter of fact, this work is an approximation of Tralfamadorian novels, which present a "clump of symbols" (88) or images—apparently unrelated but all carefully chosen by the author—so that they can represent "the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time" (88). In his travel through time to Tralfamadore, Billy is told that the novels there consist of clumps of symbols which, with stars in between, function something like telegrams, with each clump a message about a situation or scene. But the clumps are not read sequentially as the chapters are in an Earthling novel of the ordinary sort. They are read simultaneously. Billy is also told:

There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning,
no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. (88)

_Slaughterhouse-Five_, with its narrative characterized by “a temporal-mosaic” (Blackham 160) and “grotesque filigreed incongruity” (Blackham 159), borders on this type of novel. As Vonnegut puts it well, on the title page of the work, “This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.” For Vonnegut, the “telegraphic schizophrenic” narrative stands in conformity with the fact that

the memories of war remain virtually submerged, emergent only in random and unstructured recollections: they stay for the most part unrealized, stubbornly resistant to the writer’s mechanistic efforts to order them systematically. (Walsh 196)

Thus, Lundquist is perceptive enough to note:

Its chapters are divided into short sections (clumps if you will), seldom more than a few paragraphs long. The time-tripping, both by Billy and the narrator, produces an effect somewhat like that achieved in the Tralfamadorean novel—to see moments at once. The time tripping also serves to eliminate suspense. (72)

Stated briefly, Vonnegut’s techniques do encourage imagistic effects and strongly question the conventional modes of chronology and suspense that drive toward the opposite. He destroys any suspense the novel might contain by revealing his plot in the beginning chapter. As the narrator says to Bernard O’Hare:

_I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby. The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier [Edgar Derby] is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he’s given a regular trial, and then he’s shot by a firing squad._ (4–5)

Besides, Vonnegut’s carnival impulse may be evidenced by his spirit of defiance as depicted in the narrator’s carnivalistic reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Lot and his wife, in Genesis:

And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been [the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah overthrown by the Lord] But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned to a pillar of salt . . . .

This one [book] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar
of salt. (22)

In other words, the narrator, like Lot’s wife, is turned into a pillar of salt in a carnival way when he looks back at the Dresden fire-bombing in the same spirit of defiance. Vonnegut’s carnival worldview may be reflected in Billy’s fantastic visit to Tralfamadore, which signifies psychological emancipation from Earthlings and Earth affairs, and in the exclamation of the hero to Tralfamadorians when talking about wars on Earth: “As you know, I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time... So tell me the secret so I can take it back to Earth and save us all: How can a planet live at peace?” (116) Since the carnivallistic worldview runs counter to laws and restrictions of convention, Vonnegut creates a variety of characters who represent ideologues of what he perceives is a debased world and who present viewpoints to be retorted by the narrator. One common means Vonnegut adopts is to render the established ideologies ludicrous or illogic so as to justify his indictment of them. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut wants to convey truths of the most unconventional sort—bring other minds into proximity and agreement with his own attitudes and beliefs. One carnivallized episode is reflected in the worst effect of modern war as portrayed in the plot of the science-fiction novel The Gutless Wonder by Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut’s alter-ego:

It [The Gutless Wonder] was about a robot who had bad breath, who became popular after his halitosis was cured. But what made the story remarkable, since it was written in 1932, was that it predicted the wide-spread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings.

It was dropped on them from airplanes. Robots did the dropping. They had no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground. Trout’s leading robot looked like a human being, and could talk and dance and so on, and go out with girls. And nobody held it against him that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgivable. But then he cleared that up, and he was welcomed to the human race. (168)

This episode is revealed as a dialogue between the authorial voice and other social voices. Obviously the authorial voice with the questioning voice assimilated in it throws out challenges to other social voices: nobody complains about the pilot-robot’s act of dropping napalm on people though “they found his halitosis unforgivable.” Here, the major concern of this episode is presented: the carnivallistic laughter (in tone and style), and a deconstruction of socially bonded voices. For Bakhtin, laughter is the most evident characteristic of the carnival. Laughter, “critical and disruptive,” is “anti-systematic and thereby subversively critical of the hierarchical levels and separations all systems institute” (Carroll 88). In his analysis of carnivalesque laughter, Alan Swinewood notes:
Through its openness and accessibility to the whole community laughter becomes the arbiter of truth as the sole cultural element which attains universality: laughter liberates individuals from dogmaticism and fanaticism "from the single meaning" and "single level." Laughter "purifies and completes" seriousness restoring its ambivalent wholeness. (108)

The laughing aspect in the above episode is especially effected through the very first sentence which sets up the strategy of taking the commonplace out of its bounds and carnivalizing it: even the treatment of halitosis seems comic. Behind the laughter, we see that the authorial voice gives the reader perspective on the absurd values of the contemporary reality and offers a judgment of both the military and the civilian minds-representing socially bonded voices-that can connive at atrocities: for it carnivalizes anyone who commits them into a robot in the first place, and it satirizes the strange system of values that can accept these robots as people. As Karl indicates:

The image [dropping napalm] is an excellent one, as connected to Vietnam, where there was no association between pilots thousands of feet above the ground and the people they were destroying. Such men were robots; volunteers well trained for random destruction. (347)

It is important to emphasize that this robot characterization, the attack on established voices by the controlling voice, and the consequent demolition of social voices are tactics integral to Slaughterhouse-Five. In fact, nearly every chapter introduces character-ideologues whose voices Vonnegut carnivalizes. Even in the opening chapter which describes his efforts to gather information about the firebombing of Dresden, the chapter not directly concerned with his hero's story, Vonnegut breaks into venomous assault against the voices of glorifying war as a mature male activity. The suspicious hostility of Mary O'Hare, who thinks "wars are partly encouraged by books and movies" (15), to the projected book of the narrator, who understands and agrees with her criticism of the social belief system, is an obvious example to illustrate how Vonnegut carnivalizes a socially bonded voice:

"Well, I know," she [Mary O'Hare] said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. and they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs." . . . I [the narrator] said, "If I ever do finish it [the book to be written about the Dresden holocaust], though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne." (14–15)
The carnival overtone is reflected in the narrator’s conviction of the two famous movie stars’ disqualification, for we are told that the book, if finished, will by no means become anything that John Wayne and Frank Sinatra may star in when it is made into a movie. Moreover, implicit in Mary O’Hare’s statement about war are the paired carnival images (glamorous / ugly, wonderful /defective)—with their spirits of the turnabout—embodying the socially bonded ideology and effecting the upside-down logic: war is regarded not as ugly and defective but as glamorous and wonderful. The narrator, in the context of questions and responses, asserts that he, Bernard O’Hare, and most of the other men “had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (14). The authorial voice thereby disavows the conventional social belief that war, tinged with an aura of glamour, is a mature masuline venture, and pinpoints that war is fought by mere babies, a fact bordering on a cruel reality. Last, Vonnegut’s subversive carnival spirit is revealed in the narrator’s intention to write a book, not extolling but discouraging war. It is not surprising, given this assessment, that Vonnegut undertakes to authorize his own voice. Speaking in his own voice, he attacks by implication fiction which treats war as glamorous activity. He mocks also the pedantry of the war writer by describing his own clumsy attempts to make fictional capital out of the war. Put briefly, Vonnegut dismantles social ideologies only to create his own; his overt characterization of counter-voices is only the most apparent method of carnivalization.

A similar tactic is at work in the “slapstick scenes and comic preposterousness” (Reed 202) with which the carnivalized episode of the British POWs is replete. For one thing, the fantastic jollity of the British officers is revealed in the language of the scene which surprises us with words like “lusty”, “ruddy”, “boominly,” “rodomontades,” “azure curtains,” “darling elves” (93–96). Here, Vonnegut’s language, attempting to wander outside the bounds of socially instituted ways of thought, makes us see familiar things in an unfamiliar or extraordinary way. As Bakhtin notes, in the carnivalized literary form, “everyday life is drawn into the carnivalized action of the plot; the ordinary and constant is combined with the extraordinary and changeable” (Bakhtin, Problems 158). Another example is manifest in the description of Derby’s capture, where Vonnegut uses an unworlty vocabulary by pulling back from that level of reality in which we talk of “bullets” to the level in which we see “lumps of lead in copper jackets... zipping along much faster than sound” (106). A sky filled with shrapnel becomes the “incredible artificial weather that Earthlings sometimes create for other Earthlings when they don’t want those other Earthlings to inhabit Earth any more” (106). Such diction forces us to look in fresh and new ways at very familiar things as though we were reading a report for non-Earthlings, and makes us aware that the discrepancy between the terrifying reality and the fantastic description of it relays the message more effectively than a straightforward description. On the other hand, the British officers in a prison camp are portrayed with a clownish cynicism, which reflects Vonnegut’s perception of the naïveté of those POWs. The authorial voice thus mocks and debunks the Englishmen’s buffoonery: “They were adored by the Germans, who thought they were exactly
what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look STYLISH and REASONABLE, and FUN” (capitals added 94).

For Vonnegut, the carnivalized incident may be embodied through the discrepancy between terrifying reality and the playful description of it. A noticeable example appears in Paul Lazzaro’s sermonette on “the sweetest thing there is” (138): revenge. Lazzaro tells Billy and Derby a gruesome story about how he retaliated upon a dog that bit him:

Son of bitch bit me. So I got me some steak, and I got me the spring out of a clock. I cut that spring up in little piece. I put points on the ends of the pieces. They were sharp as razor blades. I stuck’em into the steak--way inside .... He wanted to bite me again. I said to him, “Come on, doggie--let’s be friends. Let’s not be enemies any more. I’m not mad.” He believed me. I threw him the steak. He swallowed it down in one big gulp. . . . Blood started coming out of his mouth. He started crying, and he rolled on the ground, as though the knives were on the outside of him instead of one the inside of him. Then he tried to bite out his own insides. I laughed, and I said to him “You got the right idea now. . . .” (139)

Lazzaro proves in this carnivalized episode to be the ugly incarnation of the spirit of revenge. Vonnegut’s grotesque portrayal of a grisly scene is consistent with his cheerful satiric barbs at the horrifying revenge taken on among enemies.

Carnivalization of official ideology allows Vonnegut to wrench language from its traditional significations through his redefinition of language. He envisions the possibility of re-examining language in a new mode, and sets up his authorial-monological voice. Asserting that there is nothing sacred about any human being, Vonnegut redefines the concept of man in Tralfamadorian perspective: “Lionel Merble [Billy’s father-in-law] was a machine. Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” (154). Thus, human beings are degraded and becomes machines. To clarify this point, Vonnegut describes living beings mechanistically, as when the group of POWs is said to be “essentially a liquid which could be induced to flow slowly toward cooing and light” (80), and as when, taken into a Tralfamadorian zoo for exhibition, Billy is imagined by the crowd as a grotesque robot with his head “encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off” (115):

There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe. . . . He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to the flatcar. All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe. He
didn’t know he was on a flatcar, didn’t even know there was anything peculiar about his situation. (115)

Here, Earthlings, who are carnivalized into machines, are no free agents. We are told that human beings, with no free will, are in fact manipulated by outside forces unknown to them and that they cannot but grope helplessly in the dark. Apart from his redefinition of man as machine, Vonnegut seems to indicate that human beings’ choices cannot decide their own destinies, for their fates are predetermined. Vonnegut’s redefinition of death does not conform to social-ideological cultures. He follows every mention of death with that familiar phrase, “So it goes” throughout The Slaughterhouse-Five. In this way he attempts to persuade himself to accept a saner attitude towards the inevitable. His concept of death, as viewed in the Tralfamadorian notion in which Billy finds consolation, is that people who are dead in the present remain alive in the times of their past. Such a concept seems to imply that we too should be consoled: the dead still live in our memories.

“Bakhtin hypothesizes that the origins of language itself may lie in the sharing of food as a primal expression of culture over nature, establishing a connection between digestion and dialogue” (Clark and Holquist 302). For him, in the carnival world, the feast coupled with its crowds and abundance of food is “a transfer to the utopian world” (Rabelais 276), and “[m]an’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself” (301). Such a concept may be applied to Vonnegut’s grotesque description, in terms of the feast and food, of the apparent discipline and high spirits of the British prisoners, which represent their ostentatious spiritual triumph. Vonnegut’s undercuts the apparent triumph and superiority of the British POWs by making it traceable to a clerical error that brings about their getting not 50 but 500 Red Cross parcels and puts them in an ironic bargaining position with their alleged enemy. In his description, we are given the most detailed enumerations of the various kinds of food and goods along with a precise account of their exaggerated quantities:

They were among the wealthiest people in Europe in terms of food. A clerical error early in the war . . . had caused the Red Cross to ship them five hundred parcels every month instead of fifty. The Englishmen had hoarded these so cunningly that now, . . . they had three tons of sugar, one ton of coffee, eleven hundred pounds of chocolate, seven hundred pounds of tobacco, seventeen hundred pound of tea, two tons of flour, one ton of canned beef, twelve hundred pounds of canned butter, sixteen hundred pounds of canned cheese, eight hundred pounds of powdered milk, and two tons of orange marmalade. . . . So the Germans let them have four sheds, though one shed would have held them all. And, in exchange for coffee or chocolate or tobacco, the Germans gave them paint and lumber and nails and cloth for fixing things up. . . . (94–95)
The Englishmen had known for twelve hours that American guests were on their way. They had never had guests before, and they went to work like darling elves, sweeping, mopping, cooking, baking, making mattresses of straw and burlap bags, setting tables, putting party favors at each place. . . . (95)

It is through his hyperbolic and clownish depiction that Vonnegut implies that the lack of discipline of the visiting Americans, only with whom the British share their hoard of supplies, turns out to be as disgusting as the British officers' behavior is unrealistic.

Vonnegut's carnivalesque perception can also be reflected in his grotesque presentation of the human body, which for Bakhtin may be portrayed "in a variety of different aspects, various first of all in its anatomical and physiological aspect" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 171). The grotesque use of the fantastic to describe the human body--its parts, members, and organs--are well illustrated in *Slaughterhouse-Five* with precise anatomical and physiological details. One example is manifest in Vonnegut's delineation of the apparent superiority of the "lusty, ruddy" (93) British prisoners: "The Englishmen had also been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years. Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs..." (94). An analogous example appears in the weird passage, which shows Vonnegut's strong inclination to be recognized and later to be identified with Billy the hero, who goes outside to move his bowels finding all his fellow Americans terribly sick with diarrhea:

Billy took his pecker out, there in the prison night, and peed and peed on the ground. . . . (124)

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, there they go, there they go." He meant his brain.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of his book. (125)

In order to describe the human body in its grotesque and fantastic aspect, a mass of the most varied objects and phenomena are drawn into the body series. As Bakhtin notes,

In this new context they [those objects and phenomena] are immersed in an atmosphere of the body and of the life of the body; they enter into a new and unexpected matrix with body organs and processes; in this body series, they are brought down to earth and made more material. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 173)

In this light may be seen the grotesque imagery in Billy's time-travel to Tralfamadore, in which he and Montana, a movie star in "blue movies" (207), are exhibited clownishly as animals to the Tralfamadorians and brought together for mating purposes:
He was reclining on the lounge chair which had been his cradle during his trip through space. He was naked. The Tralfamadorians were interested in his body—all of it. There were thousands of them outside, holding up their little hands so that their eyes could see him. . . . Billy got off his lounge chair now, went into the bathroom and took a leak. The crowd went wild. (112)

The vast crowd outside was delighted. All attendance records for the zoo were broken. Everybody on the planet wanted to see the Earthlings mate. . . . Montana was naked, and so was Billy, of course. He had a tremendous wang, incidentally. You never know who’ll get one.

Now she fluttered her eyelids. Her lashes were like buggy whips. . . . Around her neck was a silver chain with a heart-shaped locket hanging from it—between her breasts. . . . she asked him shyly if he wouldn’t sleep with her. Which he did. It was heavenly. (132–3)

In discussing the grotesque use of the human body, Bakhtin points out: “It was important to demonstrate the whole remarkable complexity and depth of the human body and its life, to uncover a new meaning, a new place for human corporeality in the real spatial-temporal world” (The Dialogic Imagination 170). Thus, Billy’s Tralfamadore fantasies, depicted with a clownish cynicism and an idiosyncratic artistic presentation of the human body, clearly serve important purposes both in the protagonist’s exploration of alternatives to the Earthling view on sexuality and in the author’s debunking of the absurdities of the dominant ideology of the middle-class male, who, bored in a sterile and prudish marriage, wants a woman like Montana as compensation.

Associating wartime atrocities and cruelties with ancient torture instruments, Vonnegut, by grotesque exaggeration, gives precise anatomical descriptions of the wounds and torments inflicted on the human body. Thus, in his description of Weary’s telling Billy about “neat tortures” (36), Vonnegut gives us a detailed series of human members and organs:

Weary told Billy about neat tortures he’d read about or seen in the movies or heard on the radio—about other neat tortures he himself invented. One of the inventions was sticking a dentist’s drill into a guy’s ear. He asked Billy what he thought the worst form of execution was . . . The correct answer turned out to be this: “You stake a guy out on an anthill in the desert—see? He’s facing upward, and you put honey all over his balls and pecker, and you cut off his eyelids so he has to stare at the sun till he dies. (36–37)

The images of the material bodily lower stratum deeply pervade Slaughterhouse-Five and correspond to a humorous theme of debasement, which for Bakhtin is “the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism” (Rabelais 370). With the imagery of debasement, the portrayal of the indiscipline and laxity of American prisoners is infused
with the body series, which intersects with defecation series. Here is a characteristic description:

Billy looked inside the latrine. The wailing was coming from in there. The place was crammed with Americans who had taken their pants down. The welcome feast had made them as sick as volcanoes. The buckets were full or had been kicked over. (125)

The above passage seems strange and coarse. However, it is implicit with a debasement theme and pursues a goal: to dispel the traditional concept that war is glorious and to demonstrate that American soldiers possess no high morale in the battlefield. A similar example appears in Vonnegut’s description of the POWs who, like Billy, are closed up in a box-car to be transported into enemy territory:

Human beings in there took turns standing or lying down. The legs of those who stood were like fence posts driven into a warm, squirming, farting, sighing earth. The queer earth was a mosaic of sleepers who nestled like spoons. (70)

Thus, we see the human body is depicted in its grotesque and fantastic aspect. To embody wartime excruciating experience through sensual, material, and bodily images reveals Vonnegut’s carnival impulse to ease the seriousness of the nightmarish war experience in an ironical way. Moreover, this grotesquely funny scene is a bitter comedy with its satiric barbs directed at the inhuman treatment of the POWs, who are carnivalized, in a figurative context, to inanimate things (“earth” and “spoons”) and to lifeless bodies (“sleepers”).

In the struggle for a new conception of the sex and for the destruction of the socially bonded belief, Vonnegut brings us into a carnival world of laughter, gaiety and revelry by a bizarre description of the Tralfamadorian view toward the sexuality of Earthers. According to this view, the Tralfamadorians recognize five sexes on their planet and seven on Earth. Thus we are told:

The Tralfamadorians tried to give Billy clues that would help him imagine sex in the invisible dimension. They told him that there could be no Earthing babies without male homosexuals. There could be babies without female homosexuals. There couldn’t be babies without women over sixty-five years old. There could be babies without men over sixty-five years old. There couldn’t be babies without other babies who had lived an hour or less after birth. And so on. (114)

This carnivalized incident, saturated with grotesque fantasies, not only brings us into a topsy-turvy world where everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosen-
ed and mocked but also pinpoints the authorial voice of debunking the absurdity of emphasis on sexual differences in his contemporary world. Inherent in this incident is the sexual series, which, as Bakhtin puts it, serves the function of destroying "the established hierarchy of values via the creation of new matrices of... phenomena" (The Dialogic Imagination 192). In Vonnegut there is hyperbolization of the sexual act, which contributes to a heroization of the function of such an act and loses its commonplace quality, its everyday and naturalistic coloration. Here is a grotesquely exaggerated description of Billy's wedding night with Valencia--daughter of the wealthy optometrist Lionel Merble, who uses his optometry business as the bait with which to trap Billy into marrying his daughter--with emphasis on the heroization of the function of sexual activity:

Billy was on top of Valencia, making love to her. One result of this act would be the birth of Robert Pilgrim, ... who would then straighten out as a member of the famous Green Berets. ... While Billy was making love to her, she imagined that she was a famous woman in history. She was being Queen Elizabeth the First of England, and Billy was supposedly Christopher Columbus.

Billy made a noise like a small, rusty hinge. He had just emptied his seminal vesicles into Velancia, had contributed his share of the Green Beret. (118)

Behind the grotesquely funny portrayal of Billy's consummation of his marriage to Valencia, we see the sexual series serves to bring about Vonnegut's delightful satiric barbs, which are directed toward the contemporary considerations of marriage based on domestic and economic convenience. Billy's orgasm thus is not a climax of passion and union with another personality; rather, it is the clinching of an economic arrangement. Through the sexual series, Vonnegut restructures the picture of the world, materializes it and fleshes it out.

According to Bakhtin, a specific Rabelais' artistic method can be represented through the construction of series. The human clothing series serves as a part of such a construction in Rabelais' carnival world (The Dialogic Imagination 169). In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut works out a clothing series to achieve the comic effect through Billy's clothing. When he arrives at the prison camp, Billy is given a fur-collared civilian's coat, several sizes too small.

Billy Pilgrim dressed himself. He put on the little overcoat, too. It split up the back, and, at the shoulders, the sleeves came entirely free. So the coat became a fur-collared vest. It was meant to flare at its owner's waist, but the flaring took place at Billy's armpits. The Germans found him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War Two. They laughed and laughed. (90)

And he soon acquires, out of necessity, a pair of silver boots, a muff, and an azure blue
toga, made out of a curtain. He is not trying to look funny; he is trying to survive, but when he finally arrives in Dresden, he is berated by an English-speaking surgeon for the costume which Billy thinks Fate has given him. Billy has become a sort of ironic clown, who "had no idea that people thought he was clowning" (151). In order to exemplify how pathetic Billy as a victim of war is and how ill-equipped the American army is, Vonnegut carnivalizes Billy's capture through the clothing series, in which the protagonist's costume does not go well with his stature and his looks appear so ludicrous and funny. In fact, the clothing series, with its comic irony and carnival portrait of the contemporary reality, is an echo not only of Vonnegut's sympathy with American soldiers, who, in wartime, under military circumstances, are mere victims, willy-nilly clowns, but also of his attitude toward "the uniform of the American enlisted in World War Two," (130) as revealed in the propaganda-writing of Campbell, the American Nazi, who hits on truths that even Americans themselves tend to overlook:

Every other army in history, prosperous or not, has attempted to clothe even its lowest soldiers so as to make them impressive to themselves and others as stylish experts in drinking and copulation and looting and sudden death. The American Army, however, sends its enlisted men out to fight and die in a modified business suit quite evidently made for another man, a sterilized but unpressed gift from a nose-holding charity which passes out clothing to drunks in the slums.

When a dashing-clad officer addresses such a frumpishly dressed bum, he scolds him, as an officer in any army must. But the officer's contempt is not, as in other armies, avuncular theatricality. It is a genuine expression of hatred for the poor, who have no one to blame for their misery but themselves.

A prison administrator dealing with captured American enlisted men for the first time should be warned: . . . Each will be a sulky child who often wishes he were dead. (130)

In discussing Rabelais' carnival world, Bakhtin indicates, "[T]he image of death is devoid of all tragic or terrifying overtones. Death is the necessary link in the process of the people's growth and renewal. It is the 'other side' of birth" (Rabelais 407). In Vonnegut's system of images, the combination of death and laughter is characteristic. The episode of Billy's delivering a speech before a capacity audience in 1976 ends as follows:

Billy predicts his own death within an hour. He laughs about it, invites the crowd to laugh with him. "It was high time I was dead." . . . Billy Pilgrim rebukes them. "If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I've said. . . . "No, no," says Billy serenely. "It is time for you to go home to your wives and children, and it is time for me to be dead for a little while--and then live again." . . . So Billy experiences death
for a while. It is simply violet light and a hum. There isn’t anybody else there.
Not even Billy Pilgrim is there. Then he swings back into life again, all the way
back to an hour after his life was threatened by Lazzaro—in 1945. (142–43)

Birth and death meet in this scene. Death is the “other side” of birth. In order to
demonstrate and subvert the absurd business of living in his contemporary world, Vonnegut
uses Billy’s clownish time-travel as a means to intersect life with death. Thus, the
mingling of opposites—an element of carnivalization— is reflected with the ambivalent
nature: in life death is foreseen, and in death life. In this example of the grotesque
portrayal of death, the image of death itself takes on humorous aspects: death is inseparable
from laughter. Vonnegut here portrays death with an inclination to laugh about it; he
portrays delightful death.

“The kind of time peculiar to carnival,” for Bakhtin, “is the release from time, a
respite from the relatively closed and rigid historical patterns that dominant ideologies
impose on time’s flux” (Clark and Holquist 302). During Billy’s time-travel, death is
presented in close relationship with the carnivalized concept of time. We are offered
a new picture of time coupled with death through Billy’s letter:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person
dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very
silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments always have existed, always
will exist. . . . It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows
another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone
forever. . . . Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug
and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is “So it goes.”
(27)

The episode of the Tralfamadorian outlook on time, though eccentrically depicted, is
implicit with Vonnegut’s resigned Stoicism: if one cannot change anything, one must
learn to accept it (“So it goes”). The authorial voice of a hopeless shrug in the face of
the inevitable and of a utopian vision of breaking off the earthly linear-time scheme so
as to release himself from earth-bound horrors can be deeply felt in this incident.

Billy’s time-travel is used by Vonnegut to juxtapose events in a carnival way. In one
episode, Billy moves from the Tralfamadorian zoo to his wedding night with Valencia.
When he gets up to go to the bathroom, he finds himself in a German prison camp,
looking for the latrine. When he leaves the latrine, he finds himself back with Valencia,
having just returned from the bathroom. He goes to bed, falls asleep, and awakens on
a train on the way to his father’s funeral—with an erection. The episode, teeming with
the carnival spirit of the turnabout, inside out, or upside down, reveals that time moves
in a confused or disordered manner and that cause and effect are also reversed: Billy’s
erection in 1944 is caused by his wedding night in 1948. For Bakhtin, this sort of time
is called carnivalized time, “excluded, as it were, from historical time, flowing according to its own special carnival laws and finding room in itself for an unlimited number of radical shifts and metamorphoses” (*Problems* 176). Precisely this kind of time is necessary to events that Vonnegut portrays in the fantastic, alien outer space. Another example of carnival juxtaposition of events can be seen in the following description:

Billy blinked in 1965, traveled in time to 1958. He was at a banquet in honor of a Little League team of which his son Robert was a member. The coach, who had never been married, was speaking. . . .

Billy blinked in 1958, traveled in time to 1961. It was New Year’s Eve, and Billy was disgracefully drunk at a party where everybody was in optometry or married to an optometrist. (45–46).

The carnivalized time, characterized by “radical shifts” and “metamorphoses”, makes Billy move backwards, forwards, sideways through time. The fantastic episodes above reveal Vonnegut’s discourse of nonsense which explicitly carries the carnival spirit of “mak[ing] sense from nonsense and nonsense of sense” (Morson, “Who Speaks for Bakhtin?” 236). As Susan Stewart remarks, “In th discourse of nonsense, causality is everywhere in all directions, and is. . . arbitrary. . . . When ‘anything can happen,’ anything can happen in any order” (138). As a Tralfamadorian novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, should be read, as noted earlier, as a work where situations or scenes should be simultaneous, not sequential. Simultaneity, which is defined by Stewart as “the quality of existing, happening, occurring at the same time in more than one space” or as “the quality of being coexistent in time while being contiguous in space” (146), stands in direct contradiction to a noncarnival sense of time: different times can never be cojoint and their relation is a non-simultaneous one. As a nonsense method, simultaneity is the stuff of which fantastic stories, such as Vonnegut’s, are made. Vonnegut’s free use of time-shifts to dramatize the uninterrupted rhythms of war is noticeable in the simultaneity of the Second World War and Vietnam. Vietnam is mentioned throughout the novel, by means of direct reference to facts and figures or the war dead, through the belligerent marine major who speaks at Billy’s Lions Club, and in a number of narrative incidents (as when Billy, as an optometrist, treats a boy whose father has been killed in the battle for Hill 875 near Dakto).

Parody of sacred texts or established truths is an aspect of the carnival sense of the world. In carnival, parody is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut tries to destabilize and invalidate the conventional religious beliefs—which are designed to solidify the social structure and express social “truth”—by questioning and breaking down their ideological bases. The story of Trout’s *The Gospel from Outer Space*, in which a visitor from outer space studies Christianity and concludes that Christians are cruel partly because of “slipshod storytelling in the New Testament” (108), is used by Vonnegut as
a means of deconstructing the socially ingrained voice and creating his voice: his new Gospel, in which “Jesus really was a nobody” (109). This kind of parody of holy texts and socially accepted truths also appears in the following two Trout stories. One story is about a time-traveler who sees the twelve-year-old Jesus and his carpenter father, Joseph, accept a contract to build a cross for “the execution of a rabble-rouser” (202). The authorial voice here is that no one, not even Jesus, escapes complicity in mankind’s evil. The other story is about the time-traveler whose discovery is in response to the oft-quoted question whether Jesus really died on the cross. Vonnegut writes:

> The time-traveler was the first one up the ladder, dressed in clothes of the period, and he leaned close to Jesus so people couldn’t see him use the stethoscope, and he listened.

> There wasn’t a sound inside the emaciated chest cavity. The Son of God was dead as a doornail. (203)

The time-traveler’s discovery is a good example to illustrate Vonnegut’s version of a theme common in contemporary literature: God is dead. The time-traveler here is like the “mad man” who loudly proclaims the death of God, as described in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*:

> Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. . . . “Whither is God?” he cried. “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. . . . God is dead. God remains dead. and we have killed him. . . . What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.” (181)

Along this line of theme, it is important to note that Vonnegut, with the Nietzschean sentiment, mocks Christianity by parodying the myths on which it is based. Believing that organized religion is as dangerous as any other form of organized authority, he highlights considerable discrepancy between the ideals that form the basis of religious faith and the religious institutions whose actions he finds are often atrocious. Through the parodic stories, Vonnegut obviously “downgrade[s] the effect of the spiritual world on our physical world” (Gilligan 22), and “the transcendental notion of a world beyond is . . . deflated” (Gilligan 21).

Vonnegut’s carnival impulse also manifests itself in his parodic identification of Billy Pilgrim with the Christian pilgrimage. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is a pointed connection between the protagonist’s name and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a seventeenth-century moralistic novel, in which the hero, called Christian, encounters many adventures and setbacks on his journey from the world of sin to the foot of the cross, where he
finds salvation. All of Billy's story may be thought of as a parody of Pilgrim's Progress. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy passes through absurd scenes and excruciating traumas of the modern life and, surprisingly enough, the happiness he finds is from outer space among aliens. Obviously, there is an ironic contrast between Christian's life of purpose, discovery, and meaning and Billy's life of victimization and escape. Unlike Bunyan's hero, Billy Pilgrim's progress is not toward the celestial city, but toward the slaughterhouse by virtue of human beings' ingenious devices for self-destruction (Schulz 59–60). In carnivalizing Billy into a kind of Christ figure, "self-crucified" (80), Vonnegut uses parody, a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion, as "a threatening, even anarchic force, one that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts" (Hutcheon, "Modern Parody and Bakhtin" 100).

Vonnegut's carnival subversiveness is revealed in his questioning the validity of history itself. Like New Historicsits, who argue that a detached or objective study of the past is impossible since the historical past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of written representations or "by way of its prior textualization" (Jameson 35), Vonnegut shares the belief that the official accounts of the past events are a mere myth imposed on history and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests—a belief that runs in parallel with the Nietzschean idea, "You can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present" (The Use and Abuse of History 40). As Allen Thiher indicates,

[It is a dominant assumption of much contemporary fiction that only a proper understanding of history, a demystification of History, can allow us to gain the lucidity and freedom to deal with those confusions and atrocities that History, as we are still wont to say, thrusts upon us. (190)]

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut thus seeks to deauthorize the official history in order to codify and empower the authorial voice. Vonnegut incorporates expressed views of Dresden bombing by two senior air commanders: Ira C. Eaker, Lieutenant General, U. S. A. F., retired, and British Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby. General Eaker's view sounds like President Harry S. Truman's in its reasoning, but the tone is definitely more belligerent. General Eaker, who advocates the official history, obviously justifies the bombing in the context of war and the defeat of Nazism:

I find it difficult to understand Englishmen or Americans who weep about enemy civilians who were killed but who have not shed a tear for our gallant crews lost in combat with a cruel enemy. I think it would have been well for Mr. Irving to have remembered, when he was drawing the frightful picture of the civilians killed at Dresden, that V-1's and V-2's were at the very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women, and children indiscriminately, as they were designed and launched to do. . . . I remember who started the last war and I
regret even more the loss of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in the necessary effort to completely defeat and utterly destroy nazism. (187)

Rejecting the official view of the Dresden bombing, Vonnegut makes his incisive criticism of the military manner of thinking. By having the “warmongers” speak, he clearly lets them damn themselves. Then he embodies his authorial voice in General Saundby, who laments the Dresden holocaust as a tragic mistake, and points up its comparability with atomic destruction. General Saundby’s view is calmer in its language. It designates Dresden as the worst massacre in history. As he points out:

That the bombing of Dresden was a great tragedy none can deny. That it was really a military necessity few, after reading this book [David Irving’s The Destruction of Dresden], will believe. It was one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in war time, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances.

The advocates of nuclear disarmament . . . would do well to read this book and ponder the fate of Dresden, where 135,000 people died as the result of an air attack with conventional weapons. On the night of March 9th, 1945, an air attack on Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83,797 people. The atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,397 people. (187–88)

The authorial voice, having dispelled the “confusions and atrocities that History . . . thrusts upon us,” later merges with the view of enlightened Professor Rumfoord, the official Air Force historian of World War II, who is revising his work into a single-volume edition: “Americans have finally heard about Dresden, A lot of them know now how much worse it was than Hiroshima. So I’ve got to put something about it in my book. From the official Air Force standpoint, it’ll all be new” (191). In one sense, Slaughterhouse-Five is an attempt not only to avoid the stylization and phoniness which characterize war stories but also to legitimate Vonnegut’s historical accounts of the nightmarish Dresden-bombing-experience. The carnival subversiveness embodied in the authorial questioning of the official history thus presents a comprehensive critique of warmongering.

Carnival is implicit with the utopian spirit, involving “the possibility of a completely different life, a life organized according to laws different from those governing ordinary life” (Bakhtin, Problems 147). Bakhtin

sees in the festive licence of the Saturnalia in its carnivalization of all normally inflexible distinctions, the embodiment of a permanent utopian longing, a glimpse of prelapsarian world free from cast and chant, “opposed to all that was readymade and completed, to all pretense at immutability.” (Bernstein 106).
In general, the utopian spirit is revealed through the written words of men who are critical of the world they live in and propose a system as a better way of life than any known to exist—a system that would be instituted if the present one could be cancelled and people could start over. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut harbors the utopian longing, presenting the outer space Tralfamadore not only as a utopian world—an earthly paradise—but also as an alternative to the human world and mankind. He represents in this work two worlds: the narrator's ideal paradise and his contemporary world he inclines to abandon. The Tralfamadorian experience renders Billy able to gain perspective on Earthlings and Earth affairs. For Billy, the Tralfamadorians function as superior beings whose philosophy enables him to come to terms with his life. They give him Montana to enable him to start the world over again as a new Adam with his Eve. For Vonnegut, the Tralfamadorians offer an opportunity, from an outsider's view, to demonstrate and subvert the absurd values of modern life and to comment on the illusions that human beings embrace. The Tralfamadorians see all time all at once—"All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance" (27)—and so to them there is no existence of the so-called free will (the idea of making choices in life). To them we are like "bugs trapped in amber" (77), for past, present, and future are all fixed. Vonnegut uses the fantastic Tralfamadorian episode to make the point that his contemporary world is sick and needs a new vision—a utopian vision.

By and large, *Slaughterhouse-Five* takes on a carnivalesque air. With his carnival sense of the world and his desire to demolish the ruling ideologies of his contemporary world, Vonnegut, with the spirit of literary subversion, carnivalizes social-ideological structures by undermining the authoritative language. He dismantles social hierarchies only to create his own voice. By creating a carnival rhetoric or counter-ideology, he embodies a carnivalistic worldview hostile to the established voices and presents the utopian vision—a vision of the New World, which is represented by the planet Tralfamadore, an earthly paradise,

Note


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