

Fragmented Life: "Death of the Subject" in Slaughterhouse-Five

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Abstract: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a quintessential American postmodernist novel. Based on Fredric Jameson's postmodern cultural theories, the text will analyze the characteristic of "death of the subject". With the development of capitalism, the religion gradually lost its absolute voice in society and was replaced by extreme individualism. However, after the devastation of the two world wars, people finally realized the dangers of individualism, and the status of the subject went into extinction. In the late capitalist society, Billy Pilgrim, the main character, was hard to gain a sense of belonging from the heroism and wealth, and gradually lost the subjectivity captured from the religion. Facing the crisis of "death of the subject", Billy had tried to save himself by "pastiche", but he failed in the end. By telling Billy's personal experience, the novel not only amply demonstrates the spiritual dilemmas prevalent in post-war society but also expresses profound humanistic concern.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Death of the Subject, Slaughterhouse-Five

1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a trend of thought that emerged in the West in the 1960s. Different from modernism, it is notable for its anti-substance and pluralism, arguing for a further break from the framework of rationality. With the development of technology and economy, western countries were entering the stage of late capitalism. Although the material life was extremely rich, people were faced with an unprecedented spiritual dilemma. Money worship and consumerism led to the alienation of human relationships, and the invention of weapons such as the atomic bomb exacerbated the war wounds. People were beginning to question and reflect on the meaning of economic and technological development and were trying to look to history for answers.

Reviewing the history of postmodernism, the trend of thought first appeared in the fields of philosophy and architecture, fighting against the lack of humanism in the context of globalization, and then extended to the whole field of cultural criticism. It still has an impact on the world's cultural criticism so far. As a leading North American cultural critic, Frederic Jameson focuses primarily on the development of postmodern culture in the world. His interest in postmodernism stems from the comparative study of modernism and postmodernism [1]. Influenced by a series of socialist movements in the 1960s, Jameson began to study Marxist theory and first introduced the concept of postmodernism into the field of capitalist criticism in the early 1980s [2]. Subsequently, he proposed the notion of the "death of the subject" in response to the dilemma of the subject that prevails in postmodern society.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a masterpiece by American author Kurt Vonnegut, as well as an experimental novel in the postmodern style. It is based on the author's personal experience, focusing on Billy Pilgrim's experiences in the Second World War. Because of the Dresden Bombing, Billy accidentally gained the ability to time travel, and his life became fragmented. This phenomenon coincides with Jameson's "death of the subject". However, most scholars usually focus on *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s creative techniques, such as black humor and metafiction, instead of subjective existence in postmodern society. How did Billy's life go to pieces? What thoughts and feelings does Vonnegut express? The paper will focus on Billy's process towards the "death of the subject" with Jameson's postmodern theory and explore the reality value of the American postmodernist novel.

2. "Death of the Subject" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In order to demonstrate that classical modernism is about to be replaced by postmodernism, Jameson pioneers the idea of the "death of the subject", which represents the end of individualism [3]. The subject is someone who is dynamic and creative. Predicated on creating a unique and private style, modernism is organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity with a distinctly individualistic character. The basis of the theory is ideological, but scholars today still dispute whether the subject exists. One side argues that the bourgeoisie as rulers had promoted individualism and the individual subject in the typical era of competitive capitalism and the heyday of the nuclear family. However, the old bourgeois individual subject no longer exists in the age of corporate capitalism. The other side stands for the post-structuralist view, believing that the bourgeois individual subject is not only a thing of the past, but that it never really existed from the beginning. This construction of subjectivity is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification that attempts to convince people of individual subject and unique personal identity [3]. For Jameson, the focus is not on the correctness and importance of these two viewpoints, but on the form and impact of the "death of the subject".

2.1. Establishment of the Subject: Decline of the Religious Belief

Religion used to dominate the Western world for a long time in the past. In the age of ignorance, God was the reason incarnate, standing as the sole subject in the heart of everyone. With the emergence and development of capitalism, the Renaissance movement began to destabilize the absolute authority of religion, and then the Enlightenment advocated total freedom from theocracy for creating an era of human-centered rationality. Since then, more and more people had chosen to become atheists and no longer cared about the nebulous world on the other side. Some people, who still had illusions about religion, used it only as a psychological placebo. This influence continued into the years Billy lived and continues to this day. In fact, Billy, who was an assistant chaplain with the army, was not a Catholic. His attitude towards Jesus was more one of genuine sympathy than piety. His father was not religious. His mother served as a substitute organist in several churches at the same time and never decided to join a particular religion. Despite this, she chose to buy the Crucifixion during the Great Depression to help establish meaning in her own life. In contrast to Billy, most of the soldiers did not give a damn about Jesus and did not want to participate in any religious services. Ironically, sacred religious implements were actually manufactured by a Hoover company. It is easy to see that religious beliefs had been overtaken by the individual subject and had become a dispensable symbol.

2.2. The Death of the Subject: Heroism and Values in Vain

Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy faces a serious spiritual crisis. Before entering World War II, Billy went through his teenage years relatively peacefully. Subsequently, he enlisted as an assistant chaplain with the army. Being incapable of fighting, Billy was captured by the enemy and taken to a prisoner of war camp after being separated from the army. Soon after, he was transported to Dresden as a laborer and witnessed the horrific bombing. After being discharged, Billy returned to his hometown and suffered a plane crash, the unexpected death of his wife, and other unfortunate experiences. Under the combined effects of mental stimulation and traumatic brain injury, he imagined a planet called Tralfamadore, from which he gained the ability to time travel. Thereafter, Billy completely lost control of his life, missing in random, disjointed snippets of time. He had witnessed countless lives lost but had picked up his life as a survivor many times. For this reason, Billy was overwhelmed with anguish, begging others not to save him and even wishing that his mother had not given him life. Neither heroism nor material wealth could ultimately be the support of Billy's life to prevent him from randomly travelling in time.

2.2.1. False Heroism

According to F. Hussey, American individual heroism is a historical product of cultural development and the core idea that makes up the culture. It grew out of man's primal need for freedom [4]. In the early 17th century, a large group of religiously persecuted missionaries arrived in North America by the Mayflower. They had not only the important mission of spreading religion but also the arduous task of opening up new territories. In a totally unfamiliar environment, these missionaries turned their quest for freedom into constant courage and motivation, creating many unattainable myths. They were considered the original heroes by later generations of Americans. In the ensuing centuries, countless people contributed to their country in the spirit of liberty, but only a few of them were praised and publicized by the official, while lots of innocent victims were covered by those glamorous heroes' resumes. As a non-combatant, Billy did not have the ability to defend himself and defeat the enemy. Therefore, being a hero became an impossible thing for him. Dominated by a sense of powerlessness, Billy felt that he was increasingly losing control over his life. It was a sign that his spirit was beginning to break. The word hero is not only too distant for Billy but for others as well. Roland Weary was once Billy's companion, who had a passion for being a hero. In the fantasy, he and two fellow scouts formed the "Three Musketeers." They rescued Billy from danger, then returned to the front line to make their mark and became legends to be admired by all. Unfortunately, Weary was abandoned by his two fellows and subsequently captured by the enemy. He eventually died of gangrene caused by a foot injury with unrealistic dreams of being a hero. Compared with Weary, high school teacher Edgar Derby was more of a hero, especially when he took it upon himself to stand up and rebuke the traitorous. He was upright and kind, but ended up being executed by firing squad for taking a teapot.

Confronted with heroism, Billy for the first time questioned the value of his existence, and the individual subject began to crumble. As Vonnegut said, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters." [5] Being an anti-hero, Billy saw many people die. Some of them wanted to be heroes, and others hoped to be saved by heroes. Survivors like Billy suffered from "aphasia" as a result of severe trauma, making it difficult to tell the truth about the war. At the same time, the government was officially encouraging its citizens to enlist in the army by promoting the stories of war heroes, and the deluded masses were joining the new war for freedom and faith. More satirically, talkative historians could judge brutal wars on the basis of

glorified historical sources alone. Only Vonnegut knows that real wars never have winners or heroes, only a bunch of uninitiated boy scouts who live and die on the battlefield [5].

2.2.2. Alienated Values

After the devastation of World War II, the West began to enter the stage of late capitalism. During this period, the Third Scientific and Technological Revolution brought with it the emancipation of the labour force and the acceleration of capital accumulation, promoting society to transform from production-based to consumption-based. In response to the spiritual crisis in society, Fromm stood for a psychological explanation of the phenomenon. Because of the extreme expansion of material freedom in a short period of time, the individual spirit was unable to adapt to the change and had to escape from it. In other words, people preferred to be controlled by consumer demand [6]. In order to flee the shadow of war, the post-war masses desperately needed to divert their attention with the help of external objects, and the abundance of material goods brought about by the technological revolution met their needs. They regained the control of their lives that they had lost in the war by consuming to help rebuild their spiritual world. As the gap between productivity and consumption power progressively widened, people began to struggle with the burden of heavy consumption. Panicked by the fear of losing the ability to dominate life again, they were forced to acquire more wealth to satisfy consumer needs. In this process, substances became the real dominators and human subjectivity disappeared. As a result of society's excessive focus on material things, interpersonal relationships were similarly alienated by finance, which led to the rise of money worship.

Confronted with heroism, Billy for the first time questioned the value of his existence, and the individual subject collapsed completely. After the war, Billy returned home to continue his education and married the daughter of the wealthy school founder. After graduation, he made a fortune in the optometry business. To others, Billy, who had a huge fortune, was undoubtedly happy, but not to himself. The shadow of the Dresden bombing always hung over his mental world, causing nervous breakdowns again and again. When faced with a family that did not understand him, Billy struggled to gain understanding and acceptance from the alienated relationship and had to rely on fantasy to comfort himself. Billy had gained nothing but money from his marriage to Valencia, and his daughter Barbara loathed him for his loss of earning power. In addition, alienated values exacerbated Billy's spiritual emptiness. As president of the Lions Club, he was unable to sympathise with the black community who were suffering from racial discrimination and chose instead to drive off in his luxury car. All the phenomena showed that Billy's mental trauma was not only difficult to heal with a highly rich material life, but also deteriorated under the domination of consumerism and money worship.

2.3. Self-help of the Subject: Pastiche Narrative

As Niebuhr says in the Serenity Prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" [5]. For Billy, God here did not mean the traditional religious subject; rather, it was himself who fantasised about Tralfamador. Although the meaning of Pilgrim was relevant to the religion, Billy chose to see Tralfamador as his gospel. In order to reconstruct his own subjectivity, he took inspiration from Kilgore Trout's science fiction novels and tried to work out the logic of how things happen from the correlation between past and present in the process of time travelling. For example, the connection between the sweets Valencia eats and Wiley, who called himself "Three Musketeers," or between the barbershop quartet and the guards who sing during the bombings. However, Billy did not

succeed in terms of results: he not only made his relationships deteriorate but also was reduced to an object dominated by material wealth.

As mentioned, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel with an autobiographical bent. In other words, Vonnegut's experience was largely the same as Billy's. In real life, he was not only confronted with the trauma of war but also challenged by the aesthetics of his art. Under the influence of the collective spiritual crisis of society, postmodern artists could hardly create new styles and combinations. They could only create by "pastiche," that is to say, imitating the existing and dead artistic characteristics [3]. In postmodernist literature, pastiche is shown primarily as the insertion of quotations, rhetorical patterns, or non-native expressions [2]. It made *Slaughterhouse-Five* take on the characteristics of Tralfamadorian one: "Each clump of-symbols is a brief, urgent message describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other" [5]. Vonnegut not only borrowed the style of science fiction from Wells but also made "experimental innovations in writing techniques" in traditional humour novels, forming a style of black humour novels [7]. This creative approach then became Vonnegut's distinctive creative style, imitated by other postmodernist writers. Even though the "death of the subject" had become an inevitable trend, individualism still existed in postmodernist creativity and did not fully conform to Jameson's theory of postmodern culture.

3. Significance of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Slaughterhouse-Five is a quintessential American postmodernist novel. As a first-hand witness to World War II, Vonnegut was haunted by the prolonged official U.S. embargo on the bombing of Dresden and wanted to create a work that would bring the story to light. Bitterly traumatized by the war, he struggled to face those brutal memories head-on for a long time, until the Vietnam War broke out. In the face of the increasingly numb masses, he believes it is time for people to recall the bitter lessons of World War II and regain their reverence for life. Upon its release, the novel attracted attention with its fragmented, collage-like narrative and darkly humorous linguistic style, and then it subsequently leapt to become a seminal work of postmodern and new war fiction in the United States [8]. Although this unique style of writing makes the novel more difficult to understand, it inevitably evokes memories of the World War II era and activates thoughts and feelings [9]. In his review of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Peter Frith notes that Vonnegut deliberately refrained from using a traditional narrative in order to avoid making the horrors explicable. After all, there is nothing sensible to say about a massacre [10]. The author appeared to have a negative attitude towards the future of postmodern society but actually hoped that the world would learn from the experiences of the novel's protagonist. Meanwhile, he conveyed sympathy for those who had been traumatized by war, criticism of those who had forgotten the pain of war, and concern for minorities who were discriminated against in society.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Billy's subjectivity from religion was gradually dying due to war trauma and alienated values. His attempt to save himself also ended in failure. By pastiching and organizing Billy's fragments of life, Vonnegut pointed out the spiritual dilemmas prevalent in postmodern society and profoundly expressed his reflections on war. The experiences of Billy echoed Jameson's postmodernist theories and fully demonstrated a humanistic concern for the collective in late capitalist society. However, while *Slaughterhouse-Five* illuminates the problem of the "death of the subject," it fails to offer a reasonable solution. For this reason, the novel presents a negative sense of powerlessness in general. How should people properly respond to the crisis of the death of the

subject? Is there still a need to rebuild the subject? These questions still deserve to be explored in detail in the future.

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