

Exploring Dissent and Critique in Anti-war Literature: A Comparative Examination of Narrative Styles in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five*

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Abstract:

Narrative techniques are powerful tools in conveying dissent and critique in Anti War literature. This paper aims to study and analyse Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* with the objective of exploring the narrative techniques employed by each author to express dissent and critique against war. The paper also aims to trace the similar and distinct features of narrative styles in the two works to highlight how two different narratives which are the results two World Wars strive to achieve the same goal, that is, to portray the incomprehensible and utterly unjustified human cost of wars. sheds light on the impact war and the criticisms of war have on literature.

Introduction:

War has been widely portrayed as an unavoidable part of human history throughout the ages. The human race has indulged in armed conflict in every part of the world, with conflicts between tribes to crises such as the World Wars. These constant armed conflicts taking place on various scales led to a popular belief that war is an inherent part of human existence; this belief, in turn, has been used over the years to not only justify the horrors of war but also to glorify them. Volunteering to join the armed forces and martyrdom have been glorified to an extent that has prevented people from questioning the objective of war.

Till the First World War, the written material about war was either history, or fiction that romanticised war and deified war veterans. It was during and after the First World War that soldiers started writing about the harrowing experience of the trenches and the trauma they went through because of the War. Poets like Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon wrote extensively about their experiences fighting the war, along with the psychological effects war had on them, with almost all of them, like most other soldiers, being admitted to a hospital due to a case of "shell-shock" at least once.

One of the first Anti War novels was *Le Feu* or "Under Fire" by French soldier-turned-novelist Henri Barbusse, published in 1916. With the beginning of what is now known as Anti War literature, the world was exposed to the horrors and gore that wars brought with themselves, along with the exposure of the political and economic agendas behind the wars themselves. These themes later transcended beyond the Anti War genre to many others, such as Hardboiled Detective, Crime and Noir, as in Graham Greene's *A Gun for Sale* where the protagonist is a hitman hired to assassinate the Czech Minister of War by an arms

manufacturing company to start a war between the two nations in order to initiate a rise in the sale of arms. The novels falling under the Anti War genre are instrumental in asking the questions — who does war really benefit? Is there a benefit of it at all? Through its' inquisitive, probing and sometimes sarcastic narrative styles, Anti War literature aims to question the extensively-propagated necessity of war.

Narrative styles play a paramount role in achieving this aim. Narratives are powerful literary tools that, in any discourse, can shape the readers' perspectives with effortless ease. Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, in her TED Talk titled *The Dangers of a Single Story* talks about the power one-sided narratives have in shaping the opinions of the audience,

Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali (the Igbo word for “to be greater than another”). How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependant on power. (Adichie 2009)

Adichie highlights how a single story or a one-sided narrative really affects the way people conceive the subject matter of the story. She gives an example of how, due to portrayal of Mexicans in popular media as “people who were fleecing the [American] healthcare system, sneaking across the border and being arrested at the border,” she was led to subconsciously view Mexicans as base and contemptible immigrants. This illustrates how popular narratives or propaganda can condition and groom the beliefs and sentiments of people who consume them at large.

Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* engages in a writing style that is a mosaic of satire and dark comedy and is sprinkled with the occasional honest, simple yet stern sentence. Vonnegut shuffles back and forth between timelines in the life of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, creating a sense of confusion and curiosity in the readers' minds. He starts from the time Billy is recovering from a plane crash in the 1960s, to his time as a soldier in the Second World War, to him being abducted by Tralfamadorians who are one-eyed, one-handed aliens with a peculiar philosophy of time; to his time in hospital, recovering from the war.

By incorporating these perplexing timelines and elements of Science Fiction, Vonnegut succeeds in creating a distorted narrative which makes the reader question Billy's sanity but also brings them face to face with the mental trauma inflicted on soldiers' minds as they go through war. This is reflected in how Billy's head injury after the plane crash triggered his memories from the war and his memories from right after the war in the hospital, when he was introduced to the works of science fiction writer Kilgore Trout. The resurfacing of old memories mixed with previous subconscious knowledge being perceived as an independent experience in itself can be seen as a sign of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Here, through his satirical narrative made up of jumbled timelines, Vonnegut leads the reader through the traumatised mind of a war veteran, who even 20 years after the war, has not been able to heal from or even escape the horrific effect that it had on him.

In *Johnny Got His Gun*, Dalton Trumbo prefers a narrative style that is called “free indirect discourse”, where a character's thoughts blend seamlessly with narration. Set during the First World War, the novel's protagonist Joe Bonham is an American soldier admitted to a hospital in France. Joe narrates his thoughts in almost a stream of consciousness method, where the contents of the novel are completely composed of his thoughts. He is aware that he is in hospital, but seems to discover his injuries with the reader as the narrative moves forward. He realises that he has lost all his limbs, and a huge chunk of his face. The narrative of the novel is truly a blend of Joe's vivid memories of his life before the war, his commentary on those memories and his present state where his consciousness ebbs and flows as the doctors give him drugs to help with the pain. He is at a point where he cannot differentiate the memories from the reality,

and when after many years of trying, he actually is able to communicate with a doctor through morse code, he is denied his request to be taken outside the hospital to be put on display for the public to see the real effect war has on soldiers, trying to contest the propaganda and glory around sacrificing one's self for one's country in armed conflict. The novel has a touch of Marxist ideology evident in it towards the end, as Trumbo emphasises, through Joe's desire to dissuade the masses from indulging in the jingoistic glorification of war, that people need to stop pointing their guns towards each other and point them towards the real enemy, the people in power who start the wars for their own benefit and deploy all recourses at their disposal, including the youth of the nation, to fight wars to win their selfish interests.

Literature Review:

The subject of war has been a widely discussed and analysed one in literature. The relationship between conflict of any kind and literature is a unique one, as literature is used as a means to not only document and relay information about conflicts, but also as a medium to explore the causes, question the objectives and examine the consequences of conflicts. Many writers such as Elaine Scarry write about how the details about effects of any particular war on humans are filtered and beautified through popular media. In her paper *Injury and the Structure of War*, Scarry says

It [effect of war on human beings] may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of an historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgment that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves. (Scarry 1985)

Here Scarry highlights the importance of incorporating the whole truth about the impact of war on all those engaged in active armed conflict in popular media narratives, as when not included, the absence of that information leads to misconceptions regarding the nature of war and the motives that lie behind it.

The theme of the body is imminent also in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* as explained by Wade Bell in his paper *The Body as Discursive Strategy in Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun*, where Bell expounds on the idea of the human body having discursive significance as the protagonist Joe Bonham uses his head to bang out the morse code in order to communicate with hospital staff that he wishes to be put up on display for the public so that he can "undermine the abstract ideals coaxing the proletariat to fight for their oppressors." Bell further relates this with the idea that Joe's incessant attempts at trying to be understood by the doctors and nurses is symbolic of the proletarian's struggle to be acknowledged and heard in the real world— like the proletarian, Joe goes above and beyond to do all in his power to make himself seen and heard, but even when he is understood, his demands to be released from the hospital are denied just like how the proletarian's voice is ignored by oppressive governments when they try to reclaim their political agency.

Tim Blackmore in his paper *Lazarus Machine: Body Politics in Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun* also talks about the body being used as an important symbol in the novel. As Trumbo makes a reference to the biblical Lazarus in the novel by naming a German soldier "Lazarus" who is killed by the Americans and his body is hanging from the barbed wire around the camp even after several attempts by the Americans to destroy it by shelling, Blackmore highlights the symbolism in the lines,

Joe struggles against the pressure of the socius that bears down on him, the forces that want him silenced, that want the propaganda machine a to run unhindered by resistant voices. Trumbo assumes a powerful

authorial position when he invokes the sign of Lazarus (until now, that has been Christ's signifying practice): "And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth"(John 11:43). (Blackmore 2000)

Joe Bonham, Trumbo's Lazarus, emerges with a vengeance, aware of his predecessor's failings..." Blackmore refers to Joe as "Trumbo's Lazarus" due to his portrayal as the one who is brought back from the dead, escaping death but by the margin of a hair and coming back only to be trapped inside his prison of a torso, yet still trying to go into the world of the living to spread his own message against the brainwashing propaganda like an evangelist travels to spread the word of the Christian God among the so-called heathens.

Through these works, authors like Blackmore and Bell highlight the politics of the body, how it connects one to the external physical world, and when harmed through mass violent processes like war, how the body has an effect on the psychological processes of one's mind and how it can double as a tool for resistance in itself.

War trauma is known to have its effect on the psychological workings of soldiers as well, with soldiers being plagued with "shell-shock" due to the wars for, sometimes, their whole lives. Ghassan Awad Ibrahim talks about war trauma and his views on what it does to veterans and, in turn, to their families in his research paper *Psychological War Trauma and Recovery: A Literary Perspective*. Awad, while talking about the mental breakdown of soldiers in the trenches during the First World War when they would see their comrades' bodies be destroyed in parts right in front of them and stay there for days till help arrived, mentions British soldier and poet Siegfried Sassoon's open condemnation of war,

As long as war and trauma are concerned, enormous and shocking numbers of psychiatric casualties have occurred to the combat soldiers during the First World War (1914-1918). According to one estimation, the mental breakdowns represented 40 percent of British battle casualties [though] military authorities attempted to suppress reports of psychiatric casualties because of their demoralizing effect on the public. (Awad 2020)

This analysis made by Awad is also reflected in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the nonlinear narrative structure and the protagonist Billy's time travelling adventures reflect a mind that is obviously traumatised by war. The shattered mental state of Billy is a testament to his sub-consciousness trying to deal with his traumatic past by altering his ability to distinguish past from present and hallucinations from reality.

It is in this context that Vonnegut's novel can be seen from a Postmodern viewpoint. Postmodernism, as a literary and cultural movement, began in the late 20th century and is mainly known for its disregard of the earlier beliefs of Western philosophy and "an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power." In his thesis on *Postmodern Narrative Techniques in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five and Cat's Cradle*, Burcu Gülüm Tekin says,

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut experiments with the use of postmodern literary techniques, intertextuality and metafiction, as well as their sub-techniques, citation, allusion, reference, parody and historiographic metafiction. These tools have the power to force the reader to reconsider his/ her own understanding of culture. When Vonnegut's use of intertextuality and its techniques are concerned, it is certain that *Slaughterhouse Five* is nourished with the factual quotations and references which are obvious and easy to detect when compared to *Cat's Cradle*. (Tekin 2010)

Tekin then goes on to expound on how even though the narrative in the novel is woven with Postmodernist techniques, Vonnegut does not align it with any distinct ideology, but with humanistic values.

The Importance of Narrative techniques in Anti War literature

Narratives, in all contexts, carry immense power as most readers only ever view and perceive a story from the perspective it is told. Narration or storytelling is not just a means of entertainment or a way to pass down information and history, but also a critical aspect of human consciousness and understanding. Thus, the perspective from which a story is told tends to be the one that suits the people who hold power in that moment of time, and in turn the ideologies they embody and support. Writers like Elaine Scarry, have been working for the democratisation of narratives in their works, trying to balance out their narratives in order to show the whole truth. Scarry highlights the ways in which popular media tries to hide or manipulate facts about war in order to not let out the true malicious and gory nature of war in the lines, A second path by which injuring disappears is the active redescription of the event: the act of injuring, or the tissue that is to be injured, or the weapon that is to accomplish the injury is renamed. The gantry for American missiles is named the "cherry picker," just as American missions entailing the massive dropping of incendiary bombs over North Vietnam were called "Sherwood Forest" and "Pink Rose;" just as Japanese suicide planes in World War II were called "night blossoms," as prisoners subjected to medical experiments in Japanese camps were called "logs," and as the day during World War I on which thirty thousand Russians and thirteen thousand Germans died at Tannenberg came to be called the "Day of Harvesting." (Scarry 1985)

By changing the names of plans for destructive and traumatic events such as bombings to names of flowers or completely unrelated objects, the governments try to shake off responsibility by hiding the gory realities that will be the consequences of these bombings. This shows the lack of moral responsibility on the side of modern governments, where, along with using monetary, natural and Human Resources for fighting their wars, they don't seem to feel that it is their moral duty to disclose the probable consequences of their decisions.

By analysing the lack of a sense of morality and or even responsibility on the behalf of the ruling class as they send the working class people off to fight wars, the Marxist leanings of Anti War writers become evident in their works. Dalton Trumbo in *Johnny Got his Gun* clearly moves towards Marxist ideology as he makes his protagonist want to expose the "big guys" who make the working class or the proletarians fight wars that occur for the economic and political benefits of the ruling or bourgeoisie class. Trumbo himself was a member of the Communist Party in post-war America. He was summoned to the House of Un-American Activities Committee where he took a principled stand against the oppressive government's red baiting of his colleagues for their political ties (alleged or authentic) with the Communist Party. Trumbo was one of the "Hollywood Ten", ten Hollywood screenwriters and directors who were blacklisted by the U.S. government and *Johnny Got his Gun* was banned. Writing for the NYU Press, Jeremy M. Glick wrote, "reading Trumbo by way of Marx: the specific sensory deprivation Bonham suffers by way of injury from imperialist war is an exaggerated representation of the sensory deprivation par for the course of capitalism writ large." (Glick 2016). Here Glick highlights how Trumbo creates an allegory of imperialist war as the way Capitalism deprives humans of their senses, just as war deprived Joe of all his sense organs.

A Comparative Analysis of dissent and critique in *Johnny Got His Gun* and *Slaughterhouse Five*

Johnny Got his Gun and *Slaughterhouse Five* are both Anti War novels published in 1938 and 1969 respectively. The authors of both of these novels had served in the First World War and the Second World War respectively. Thus, these novels reflect the differences in the reactions of people to war from the First

World War to the Second World War. *Johnny Got his Gun* was more solemn in its narration, with the protagonist describing his ebbing and flowing of thoughts as he dips in and out of consciousness while in the hospital. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut brings out the effects of war-induced trauma on the protagonist Billy, as he creates a satirical and nonlinear narrative that takes Billy on time travelling trips and encounters with aliens. Both novels explore contrasting approaches to depict the traumatic effects of war on soldiers.

Another difference that can be detected in the way Trumbo and Vonnegut portray war-induced trauma in soldiers is how Trumbo focuses completely on the physical body of his protagonist Joe, whereas Vonnegut concerns himself with the mental and psychological processes of his protagonist Billy. Joe Bonham is a soldier admitted to a hospital in France as a shell had landed next to him in battle, leading to him losing his arms, legs, eyes, nose, ears and face. The trauma of losing all of his limbs and sense organs is the root of Joe's psychological trauma as well, with him realising that he can never go home, never see his mother or siblings, never embrace his girlfriend Kareen, never play sports, never earn money or even walk around. The realisation of the devastating effects of war and how the ruling class uses the "little guys" to die in wars for their own selfish political and economic interests, all stems from him losing vital parts of his body.

On the other hand, Vonnegut's protagonist Billy Pilgrim recovers from wounds sustained during the war soon after the war ends, and his psychological trauma only comes to the surface only about 15 years after the war, when he sustains a head injury after surviving a plane crash. Vonnegut expresses Billy's war-induced trauma through his psychological adventures such as time travelling and being abducted by aliens. The wanderings and hallucinations of Billy's mind after being triggered by a recent head injury are the indicators of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Also, by making the narrative of the novel nonlinear, Vonnegut helps the reader understand what a veteran traumatised by the horrors of war goes through and how his mind works to reduce the impact of traumatic experiences and helping him grapple with them by distorting them into creating new memories that are illogical and unrealistic, like Billy's belief that he had been abducted by aliens.

Justin Zeacharias, in his research paper *An Effective Use of Non-linear Narrative Techniques in the Selected Contemporary War Novels*, says that

Kurt Vonnegut in the novel *Slaughterhouses-Five* further moves away from the conventional narrative technique. He begins the novel in linear style but cannot prolong as the war is only of massacre and destruction. Hence it doesn't deserve any logical narration. So he introduces series of flashbacks and flash-forwards to bring relief to the readers from the excessive pathos-portrayed. The characters try to escape from the routine war atmosphere. (Zeacharias 2018)

Zeacharias here emphasises on how nonlinear narrative styles disrupt the chronological flow of events and serve as a tool for portraying the fragmented and disorienting nature of war experiences for people in active combat.

The expressions of dissent against and critique of war, though distinct in styles, are prominent in both *Johnny Got His Gun* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. Both Trumbo and Vonnegut, through their separate narrative techniques, express a keen and passionate disapproval of armed conflict, focusing on the humanistic point of view where they highlight the plight of soldiers fighting the war as they watch their comrades get slaughtered each day, sometimes with their corpses rotting beside them in the trenches. The declaration of Joe Bonham to want to be put on display for the public is a clear statement by Trumbo about his views on government propaganda around war, where they signify sacrificing one's life on the front as

something manly, as an ideal to aspire for. Vonnegut did not make his views on war so obvious in *Slaughterhouse Five*, as the narrative style he employed engaged the reader and prompted them to delve deep into the themes of the text and find meaning out of the fragmented memory of Billy. Also, Vonnegut's concern seemed to be more to do with the effects war had on the psychology of soldiers, and not much emphasis was put on the political aspect of war.

Conclusion:

In the annals of literature, the works falling under Anti War genre have been the most independent, non conformist and outspoken voices of protest against the shining and glorified propaganda surrounding war upheld by governments around the world. Narratives in Anti War literature help in emphasising the power and impact of storytelling in challenging prevailing narratives and provoking social change. The consistent and dedicated spirit of works of Anti War literature expose the truth about the harrowing experiences of war and armed conflict. They also help in the survival of an intellectually sound and aware population that does not fall prey to the brainwashing propaganda of the government.

The employment of distinct narrative styles by Trumbo and Vonnegut—with Trumbo's solemn, direct narrative that delves into the physical pain felt by the protagonist while he is in the hospital with just a torso for a body, and Vonnegut's fragmented and nonlinear narrative to signify the trauma the protagonist endured due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder sustained because of the trauma he got from the war—show the sheer scale of the narrative techniques that can be employed to form Anti War literary works. It also shows how, despite having a common objective in mind, different authors take separate ways and writing techniques to achieve that objective. This variety in writing styles shows the creativity and diversity of thought when it comes to unleashing the truth about armed conflict in the world, signalling to the potential and power the Anti War genre possesses that is waiting to be tapped into.

Both Trumbo and Vonnegut subvert popular narratives about war. In the early 20th century, war was seen as a battle not just for wealth, security and resources of a nation but also of honour, where men would display their valour and courage. This narrative had prevailed since the Crusades, when the Knights Templar went to fight the 'Holy War' in Jerusalem. The romanticised idea of a "knight in shining armour" who was brave, chivalrous and valiant stemmed from the Middle Ages and attached itself very densely with the idea of masculinity all over the world. After the First World War, these narratives began to be challenged as soldiers started writing poetry to depict the horrifying reality of the trenches, the violence and the gore that they encountered while they were expected to be brave and valiant in the face of impending danger. The battles of the Somme, Gallipoli and Passchendaele are example of the most brutal conflicts on the First World War.

Trumbo and Vonnegut, along with poets like Sassoon and Graves subvert these popular narratives by writing about the inhuman experiences of war that caused crippling fear and hysteria among soldiers at the front. They wrote about the disillusionment with life, fractured and distorted sense of reality along with questioning the political systems in place that allow such disastrous wars to take place.

Through their works, Trumbo and Vonnegut also explore the toll war takes on humanity as a whole, along with evaluating the individual costs of war. Awad examines the trauma faced by war veterans, Acquainted deeply with the lives of his patients, including veterans, Kolk confirms that trauma has its so long negative aftereffect on their psyches that it prevents them from even communicating with other people successfully as they find a difficulty to express their feelings and ideas, causing them to feel bashful, embarrassed, humiliated, hopeless and scared, thus, "Whether the trauma had occurred ten years

in the past or more than forty, my patients could not bridge the gap between their wartime experiences and their current lives. Somehow the very event that caused them so much pain had also become their sole source of meaning. They felt alive only when they were revisiting their traumatic past." (Awad 2020)

Such "bashful, embarrassed, humiliated, hopeless and scared" people, if not being looked after professionally, can cause trauma and stress for their families and especially for children, thus making war-induced trauma affect the lives of people who interact with traumatised veterans across generations. Through Anti War narratives, writers express their outrage at the political systems and the ruling classes that make profits off of war, and through their writings they also urge and evoke the readers to speak out and dissent against the warmongering politicians and to confront the ethical choices they have in the face of political injustice.

The expression of dissent and critique in Anti War literature is, at the end of the day, a desire for a non-violent world and a world free from war. Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun* is seen as having a zeal for a world where people are aware of the truth about the human and economic costs of war, and where, he hopes, war does not exist, but if it does, the lives of young men and women should not be offered up at the altar of capitalism just to serve the economic interests of a few people. Another overarching theme of Anti War literature emerged to be the Marxist critiques of the social and political system. Ed Dauterich writes in his research paper titled *Johnny Got His Gun and Working Class Students: Using Rhetorical Analysis to Intellectualise Pacifism*

Trumbo's novel advocates for a class-based pacifism through the character of Joe Bonham, a young American soldier serving overseas during World War I. Joe comes from a working class background, and over the course of the novel, he flashes back to different moments in his own life that deal with the adverse effects that poverty can have on even those who are employed. He also thinks about how his lack of wealth affects his decision to enter the military and how it helped shape the morals and ideas that led him to military service in the first place. Prior to the beginning of the narrative, Joe loses all of his limbs as well as his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth when he is hit by a mortar shell. Military medicine somehow keeps Joe alive after the explosion, and the novel tracks his thoughts as he regains consciousness, slowly realises the details of his situation, and finally begins to question his decision to go to war. (Dauterich 2010)

Dauterich focuses on how the character of Joe, in his infirm state, is having complex but legitimate thoughts about his regret for joining the army, expounding on the idea of how the government makes people fight in the name of democracy, liberty, honour, freedom— fight in wars that never seem to end. In conclusion, dissent and critique in Anti War literature exhibit how literature can be a transformative tool for social change and for challenging entrenched and prominent beliefs. Powerful and strong narratives that threaten the establishment are treated with stigma and prohibition like being discontinued or banned, but are still read around the world. This exemplifies the influence dissenting narratives have on readers and how people persist in supporting narratives that aim to unearth all the kinds of social and political injustices people face even while being governed by governments that call themselves democratic.

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