

Breakfast of Champions: A True Postmodern Novel

アレズ・アフラ*

Arezu Afra

Abstract:

ポストモダニズム文学は伝統的な二項対立の思考様式を否定し、善悪や正不正の区別を相対化するために、様々な新しい文学表現の技法を用いている。一般にポストモダン文学の技法とされるものには、メタフィクション、ファビュレーション、パスティーシュ、間テキスト意味創造 (intertextuality)、アイロニー、諧謔 (playfulness)、風刺 (black humor)、時空の歪曲、魔術的リアリズム、ミニマリズム、マキシマリズム、断片化などがある。カート・ヴォガネットの小説『チャンピオン達の朝食』(1973年)には、これらすべての技法を見出すことができる。

Kurt Vonnegut, Publication DIAL PRESS, YEAR : 1973, Pages : 302,
ISBN : 978-0-385-33420-4

キーワード :

Kurt Vonnegut, Breakfast of Champions, Postmodernism, Postmodern writing techniques

There was a time when a novel meant a story that had a beginning and an ending. There were characters whom you could read about their thoughts, motives, plans, sufferings...etc. You could also easily classify the novels into categories like historical, romance, thriller.... But then we reached the time where things got a bit more difficult to be able to classify concepts easily. Wars not only changed the human beings' lives but they changed humanities. Everything changed when we reached the time that we can call Postmodern era.

It is believed that Postmodern era started in late 20th century which affected art and philoso-

phy, architecture and literature among other fields and a reaction against elitism of Modernism before it.

Postmodern thinkers started to oppose the thought of absolute truth and grand narratives. According to postmodernist thinkers like Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, there is no absolute truth or reality and everything in this world is relative.

This change in the worldview of Postmodern thinkers affected literature as well. Postmodernists didn't believe in the binary oppositions. According to them there is no good or bad, black and white. But you should also see the third or fourth factor in between as well! That's why Post-

*佐野短期大学 総合キャリア教育学科 Sano College Senior Lecturer

modern writers tried some new techniques in order to break free from the previous eras. They wanted to emphasize relativism and oppose elitism.

There are many writing techniques that are believed to be postmodern:

Metafiction, Fabulation, Poioumena, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Irony, playfulness, black humor, Temporal distortion, Magic realism, Technoculture and hyperreality, Paranoia, Maximalism, Minimalism, Fragmentation...

Breakfast of champions is a novel that all those postmodern techniques can be found in. This novel was written by Kurt Vonnegut(1922-2007) in 1973. The story has two main characters. Kilgore Trout is an invisible writer who is invited to a famous art gathering to deliver a keynote speech at a local arts festival in distant Midland City. Dwayne Hoover is a wealthy busi-

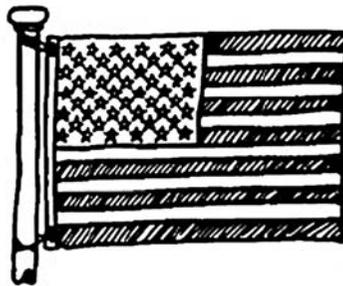
nessman who owns much of Midland City, but has become mentally unstable. The novel frequently shifts focus between Hoover and Trout, as well as supporting characters like Hoover's son, Bunny, and Wayne Hoover, and Kurt Vonnegut himself, who appears as the author of the book.

When Kilgore finally arrives in Midland City he piques the interest of Dwayne. A confused Dwayne demands a message from Kilgore, who sends a copy of his novel. Dwayne reads the novel, which purports to be a message from the Creator of the Universe explaining that the reader — in this case Dwayne — is the only individual in the universe who actually has free will. Everyone else is a robot. Dwayne believes the novel to be real and becomes even more delusional and mental and severely beats his son, his lover, and

Extract 1

There were one quadrillion nations in the Universe, but the nation Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout belonged to was the only one with a national anthem which was gibberish sprinkled with question marks.

Here is what their flag looked like:



It was the law of their nation, a law no other nation on the planet had about its flag, which said this: "The flag shall not be dipped to any person or thing."

Flag-dipping was a form of friendly and respectful salute, which consisted of bringing the flag on a stick closer to the ground, then raising it up again.

nine other people before being taken into custody. While Kilgore is walking the streets of Midland after Dwayne's rampage the narrator of the book approaches Kilgore. The narrator tells Kilgore of his existence, and lets Kilgore be free and under his own will. Kilgore begs to be made young again, and the novel ends with a full-page drawing of Vonnegut crying.

Starting from the title of this novel, we can find it a bit ironic. The fact that the title has nothing to do with the story and it is actually a trademark of a famous cereal in those years shows one of the differences of a postmodern novel with traditional novels. The chapters are usually short and there are many simple drawings in them after which there is usually an explanation (see Extract 1).

The way Vonnegut starts his novel to give some background history of the characters nationality conforms with some of the well-known postmodern techniques which are black humor and irony. These features were also used in the previous times but they are more emphasized in a postmodern novel since they could be useful techniques in order to ridicule some rigid concepts which are considered True or Accurate.

Intertextuality is another technique used by postmodern writers to differentiate themselves from the traditions. Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style or it can be references to popular genres such as sci-fi and detective fiction. Although this novel does not have a consistent storyline(which is deliberately this way as a postmodern technique) but you can find tinges of different genres in it. On one hand we've got strong ironic and comic language and funny pictures, on the other hand there are many political comments that criticize a lot of fundamental

issues from Capitalism to war policies. Considering these we can also say this novel has the element of Pastiche. Related to Postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements.. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to symbolize the diversity of concepts in postmodern era.

Metafiction is another important postmodern technique for which Kurt Vonnegut got a lot of credit. It is "writing about writing". The first chapter of his 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is about the process of writing the novel and calls attention to his own presence throughout the novel. Postmodern writers use this technique in order to draw attention to the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader. Vonnegut in this novel uses this technique as well. We can even say he took it to another level this time. Because there are two writers in the story. First it is one of the major characters who is a novelist and whose book affected Dwayne mentally. Then we have the writer of the novel who appears as a character in this novel and in the end comes to Dwayne and talks to him. If we consider the second writer as a character to this story, then we actually have three writers. The last one being Vonnegut himself.

Temporal distortion is one of the techniques which is common in both modern and postmodern literature. One of the ways to reach temporal distortion is fragmentation and nonlinear narratives. Constant changing of time and also metafiction can help achieving it. Irony and black humor are two techniques that can help the writer in temporal distortion too.

Fredric Jameson called postmodernism the "cultural logic of late capitalism". "Late capital-

ism" implies that society has moved past the industrial age and into the information age. Likewise, Jean Baudrillard claimed postmodernity was defined by a shift into hyperreality in which simulations have replaced the real. In postmodern time people are drowned in the media and capitalistic advertisement. Technoculture and Hyperreality are said to be used by postmodern writers to emphasize the society being affected by the media and consumerism.

Paranoia is a concept which is recurring in many postmodern novels since it is a phenomenon that can be caused in a society that the system can control people using technology. This is one of the techniques which we can say is used by the writer to show the fear of postmodern man of being under surveillance for different reasons. One of the most paranoid characters can be found in this novel. Dwayne Hoover becomes violent when he has convinced that everyone else in the world is a robot and he is the only human (see Extract 2).

According to H.T Lehmann, Fragmentation is another important aspect of postmodern literature. Various elements, concerning plot, characters, themes, imagery and factual references are fragmented and dispersed throughout the entire work. The writer deliberately uses this technique to interrupt the flow of the story or development of an action which can be considered modern but in postmodern novel it is used in order to depict a chaotic world. The way Vonnegut uses this technique in his novel is mingling different points of view and commenting on various matters as the author. For example there are a few pages where the reader is reading about the life of Kilgore and then immediately he shifts it to a political or ethical comment and then it changes to the life of Dwayne or some minor characters.

Using trivial sketches throughout the novel adds to this sense of fragmentation too. Vonnegut wants to make sure the reader does not read this novel as a story that has a beginning and an end,

Extract 2

Dwayne Hoover read on: "You are surrounded by loving machines, hating machines, greedy machines, unselfish machines, brave machines, cowardly machines, truthful machines, lying machines, funny machines, solemn machines," he read. "Their only purpose is to stir you up in every conceivable way, so the Creator of the Universe can watch your reactions. They can no more feel or reason than grandfather clocks.

"The Creator of the Universe would now like to apologize not only for the capricious, jostling companionship he provided during the test, but for the trashy, stinking condition of the planet itself. The Creator programmed robots to abuse it for millions of years, so it would be a poisonous, festering cheese when you got here. Also, He made sure it would be desperately crowded by programming robots, regardless of their living conditions, to crave sexual intercourse and adore infants more than almost anything."

but he tries to evoke some special responses from the reader.

It is not exaggeration if we call *Breakfast of Champions* a cry for help out of Capitalism. The whole novel Vonnegut is criticizing the society being under the effect of capitalism and advertising using black humor (see Extract 3).

Breakfast of Champions is a great example of a postmodern novel and for the readers who want to experience a well written and artistic postmodern novel it is so recommended. The reader doesn't have to be familiar with postmodern novel to appreciate this novel's black humor and Vonnegut's smart way of criticizing all the things he finds to be the subject of criticism in his society (and other places of the world).

Extract 3

The dairy at the prison provided milk and cream and butter and cheese and ice cream not only for the prison and the County Hospital. It sold its products to the outside world, too. Its trademark didn't mention prison. This was it:



