

Black Humor, a Way to Face Atrocities of the 21st Century in Kurt Vonnegut's Fiction

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut, one of the most known writers of the 20th century American Literature, has always been more concerned with ideas than with characterization. In most of his works, Vonnegut probes the question of why people commit atrocities and how they can live with their conscience. That is why he chooses humor to make readers confront the pains and sufferings. Even though Vonnegut always denied any kind of label, we can agree that he deserves to be called a Black Humorist. The term, in fact, has caused discussions among literary scholars, especially concerning the difference between black humor and satire. But in the 1960s, Bruce Friedman wrote a book called Black Humor that includes several contemporary writers. He said that writers like J. Barth, J. Heller, K. Vonnegut and others could be considered black humorists because they make readers laugh at hopeless situations. However, nothing could explain black humor – or as he called it “gallows humor” – better than Vonnegut did, when he says in Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon: “The biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments and the biggest fears”. (258) Jokes and laughs in dangerous and difficult situations are found in most of his novels, like “Slaughterhouse-Five”, “Mother Night”, “Cat’s Cradle”, etc. So, Black Humor calls attention to a significant part of Vonnegut’s fiction. That is the aim of this paper: to show how he chooses comedy to face the atrocities and sufferings of 20th century.

Keywords: black humor, satire, jokes, atrocities, respond, fiction

“So it goes” was an expression that many young students wrote in the boards in the United States of America, when protesting against the war in Vietnam. This expression was taken by a novel - which was very popular at that time - “Slaughterhouse-Five”, of the writer Kurt Vonnegut, who had suffered the atrocities of WWII.

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the most popular writers of the American literature of the late 20th century and 21st century. His career knows more than 50 years of writing and during these years, he took many awards. Even though his novels has very often been target to many attacks by critics, they do agree that he has an important place in the rank of the best American writers since the '60s and '70s. Since then he has been a public figure, not only concerning his fiction, but also speaking openly about subjects like censorship, environment, globalism, politics, etc. His portrait was very popular, not only to those who read his books, but also to those who listened to his interviews on television, his speeches in universities. Vonnegut enabled his readers to relate to his novels by giving some autobiographical signs and discussing the art of writing with the readers and making them “co-authors”.

He has been labeled a science-fiction writer, a satirist, a black-humorist, a postmodern, but he has always denied labeling. His humor is often compared to that of Mark Twain's, his style is compared to that of George Orwell's. However, he has always been unique in his art. Maybe that is the reason that it has always been difficult for critics to classify his fiction.

He uses science-fiction in his prose to find the meaning of the modern man and his/her connections to the new technology and science. This new kind of narration allowed Vonnegut to create technological and scientific systems, apocalyptic situations and a kind of relativity of time and space. We find these elements in “Piano Player”, “Cat’s Cradle”, “Sirens of Titan”, etc. In addition, we find in his novels elements typical of postmodern writers and the best novel to embody them is “Slaughterhouse-Five”. It was considered a masterpiece by his critics, in the way that Vonnegut finds to face the atrocities of the WWII. At every angle, you can see how he “plays” with the characters, with time, with space, with narration, always being accompanied by a flavor of dark humor that provokes laughter and at the same time, tears. That is why some critics called him a black-humorist, which as usual he tried to deny it as a label. But, as with science fiction and postmodernism, he used black humor as a means to face the massacres he had seed and was still seeing, and also as a means to survive the 21st century's political systems.

But before showing the elements of black humor in Kurt Vonnegut's fiction, I think it would be better to make some clarification on the matter of satire and black humor.

It has been very difficult to make a clear definition of what "black humor" is and the difference to satire, because it has been called "black comedy", "slapstick humor", "gallows humor", etc. While searching for the term in the web pages in the internet, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, it says that "Black humor, also called black comedy, is a writing that juxtaposes morbid and ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life. Black humor often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless of fate and character." (britannica.com) In Merriam-Webster's encyclopedia of literature, black humor "is a comic work that employs black humor, which, in its most basic definition, is humor that makes light of otherwise solemn subject matter, or gallows humor. The definition of black humor is problematic, it has been argued that it corresponds to the earlier concept of gallows humor." (p. 144)

Whereas, Linda Hutcheon in *"A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction"* claims that "postmodern fiction as a whole can be characterized by the ironic quote marks, that much of it can be taken as tongue-in-cheek". ...This irony, along with black humor and the general concept of the "play" are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism." (Hutcheon, 1988) However, this term was not used only during the 60's, but if we look back, we find it in France, used by Andre Breton (humor noir), in 1935, to designate a sub-genre of comedy and satire, in which laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism. In his book, "Anthology of Black Humor" (Anthologie de l'humor noir), he credits Jonathan Swift as the originator of black humor and gallows humor, and included some examples of many other writers. According to him, this kind of comedy is used to mock the victim, whose suffering is played down. It is a kind of grotesque. "When it comes to black humor, everything designates him as the true initiator. In fact, it is impossible to coordinate the fugitive traces of this kind of humor before him, not even in Heraclitus and the Cynics or in the works of Elizabethan dramatic poets." (Britannica.com)

But the first American anthology devoted to the conception of black humor as a literary genre is "Black Humor" of Bruce Jay Friedman. In his study, he included different writers and works, arguing that they shared the same literary genre. Among many figures, we can mention Edward Albee, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Therefore, black humorist wrote novels, plays, poems and songs in which profound or horrific events were portrayed in a comic manner. Some popular themes of the genre were murder, suicide, depression, abuse, war, barbarism, drug abuse, terminal, domestic violence, sex, insanity, crime, etc. We find some of these themes in most of Vonnegut's novels. He knew how to treat serious subjects in a playful and ironic manner. Critics that are even more contemporary would agree with that. In "The Vonnegut Effect", Jerome Klinkowitz said that "Comedy's role in handling reality is a given in Vonnegut's work" (Klinkowitz, 2004, 67), whereas Todd Davis calls him a "postmodern harlequin", but at the same time "humanist". (Davis, 2006)

There are other critics, who before calling him a black humorist, call him a satirist. Thomas Marvin, says that "Seen in this light, Vonnegut becomes part of the older tradition of satire, where new worlds are imagined in order to criticize our own" (Marvin, 2002). On the other hand, in an interview he gave, Vonnegut opposed the term by saying: "I've never even bothered to look it up. I wouldn't know whether I am a satirist or not." (Bryan, 1969). Maybe the reason why Vonnegut opposed more strongly to the term satirist than that of black humorist is that satirist are not moralist. They just tend to make fun, without focusing in criticizing individuals. Instead, they make fun of famous figures. Vonnegut was not like that. He was, if we can say, an "activist", who used jokes, not only for fun, but to "make a better world". In "Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut", he says: "My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that a writer should serve his society. I differ with the dictators as how a writer should serve. Mainly, I think they should be agents of change. For the better, we hope." (Allen, 1988).

However, even though Vonnegut always said that he hated labels, in Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon he responds to what black humor is for him:

"Certainly, the people Bruce Jay Friedman named as black humorists weren't really very much like one another. I am not whole lot like J. P. Donleavy, say, but Friedman saw some similarity there and said we were both black humorists. So critics picked up the term because it was handy. All they had to do was say black humorists and they'd be naming twenty writers. It was a form of shorthand. But Freud had already written about gallows humor, which is middle-European humor. It's people laughing in the middle of political helplessness. Gallows humor had to do with people in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There were Jews, Serbs, Croats – all these small groups jammed together into a very unlikely sort of empire. And dreadful things happened to them. They were powerless, helpless people and so they made jokes. It was all they could do in the face of frustration. The gallows humor that Freud identifies is what we regard as Jewish humor here: It's humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations. And I have customarily written about powerless people who felt there wasn't much they could do about their situations". (257)

As we see, he relates his humor to that of Freud's gallows humor, for as he says he "is in the business of making jokes, it's a minor art form". (WFG, 258) According to him, "American men aren't supposed to cry. So, I don't cry much – but I do laugh a lot." (WFG, 258)

Moments of laughs are found a lot in the fiction of Vonnegut, mainly in the novels. The most typical is 'Mother Night', which uses a first-person point of view and made up of small chapters that build a series of jokes. The protagonist, Howard Campbell, tells everything. He is an Israeli prisoner awaiting trial for war crimes and writing his confessions, so they may be added to an archive on Nazi war criminals. The book is kind of an autobiography of the protagonist. Two typical Vonnegut joke sequences illustrate how this technique works in this novel. Campbell's diary of his life with Helga is discovered by a Russian writer called Bodoskov who steals it and publishes it as his own book, calling it "Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova". Later, Campbell learns that Bodoskov had become famous by stealing his own memories. Finally, Campbell learns that when Bodoskov was arrested and then executed, he was not accused of plagiarism, but of originality.

In another joke sequence, Resi Noth throws away a noose that the American legion had left in Campbell's mail box. A garbage man named Szombathy finds it the next morning and hangs himself. Szombathy kills himself because he is not permitted to practice veterinary medicine. Finally, Vonnegut casually reveals that the real reason the garbage man died was because he had a cure for cancer that the world had ignored.

The Nazis in "Mother Night" are comic, rather than frightening and this effect is emphasized by the narration of Campbell, which is detached. At one point, Paul Joseph Goebbels asks Campbell to write a pageant honoring the German soldiers who died during the Warsaw uprising by Jews. When Campbell responds by translating Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address into German, Goebbels is so impressed that he gives it to Hitler to read. But he is very doubtful that Lincoln might have been a Jew. Hitler responds by writing "Some parts of this nearly made me weep. All northern peoples are one in their deep feelings for soldiers. It is perhaps our greatest bond" (16). So, this "great bond" that Hitler sees in the northern peoples is maybe the reason of all that bloodshed. All these jokes can not be understood by the protagonist very well. But Vonnegut helps him with the aesthetic distance that he uses, which at the same time makes it easier to understand them. This kind of technique is also used in what was considered his masterpiece, "Slaughterhouse-Five".

Vonnegut made a lot of effort to write Slaughterhouse-Five. He had been a soldier and was kept as prisoner in a slaughterhouse by Germans in the city of Dresden. But then the allied forces bombed it and the whole city was destroyed. The experience of WWII left wounds in Vonnegut and his friends and he had to write about it. But he strived a lot to find the best way to do it. So, he chose to use the aesthetic distance and at the same time, a flavor of humor that does not necessarily make you laugh. It is a story of Billy Pilgrim, who moves in time and in space. One moment he is at home, then he is in the planet Tralfamador, then he is at the war. This time humor is not only a means to face the atrocities, but also to establish some kind of norms, in relation to the bombing of Dresden and the German massacre of Jews. One of the typical examples is when the protagonist, Billy, asks the Tralfamadorian how he got there and they say, "It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining how this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocy Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is" (85-86). So, Vonnegut mocks with the Germans, by comparing them to the Tralfamadorians. One of the most typical example of this joke is made when Billy asks the Tralfamadorian "Why me" and they answer "That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter?" (76 – 77). But then, the narrator moves from that moment and that space and goes into the slaughterhouse, when Billy asks the same question to the German soldier and he answers "Vy you? Vy anybody?" (91). But Vonnegut ironies more Billy, when he writes, "Billy had seed the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden... So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe". (101) With this example, Vonnegut recalls an event that happened during the war with one of the soldiers. After the bombing of Dresden, he was arrested and then executed, for the only reason that he had stolen a teapot. Then, Vonnegut offers us the solution. "... to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people aren't going to want to go on living"(101).

"Harmless untruths" are in fact the solution that he gives to us even in the novel "Cat's Cradle". In this novel, he gives us an image of the end of the world. The story is narrated by John, who invites us to call him Jonah. In searching the children of the atomic bomb inventor, he arrives at the island of San Lorenzo. There he discovers a new religion, which is called Bokononism. This new religion is in fact like any other, with its own prophets, with the books of Bokonon, which says the origin and "its commandments". He discovers that the scientist Felix Hoenikker had invented a chemical elements, "ice-nine", which when in contact with water turns it into ice. In fact, at the end, Vonnegut presents us with an image of apocalyptic end of the world, where the leader of San Lorenzo dies, but had swallowed ice-nine before, turns

everything, in a chain reaction, into ice. Therefore, water becomes ice and people become statues. With this parable, Vonnegut wants us to give us an image of the end of the world if we are not careful to what science does, and if scientists are not responsible for the effects of their inventions. But, the whole story mingles some kinds of humoristic elements. The first thing Vonnegut satirizes and at the same time criticizes is religion. He is not rebelling against religion, but what he tries to say is that people have lost their faith in these religions, so they need to find new ones. That is why, he creates this new religion, which is in fact a mockery to religion itself. He says that "People don't come to church for preachments, of course, but to daydream about God." (Palm Sunday, 330).

Another example where Vonnegut uses humor, as a kind of balance to moral theme, is the description that he makes to the three children of the scientist. The old one, Frank, is an immature man, trying to resemble his father. The old one, Newt is a midget. He is an artist. He is obsessed with the memory of his father thrusting a cat's cradle in his face when he was six years old. Whereas their sister is a married woman, who does not really care, because since a little child she took the role of a mother for her brothers and her father at the same time, after the death of her mother. The absurd here lies in the fact that at the end, this father who always cared about science, decides to give them a part of "ice-nine", and the end of the world comes indirectly because of him. Klinkowitz considers the novel's action as "propelled by comedy. Just about everything Hoenikker family does is hilariously self-defeating". (The Vonnegut Effect 65).

Conclusions: Vonnegut, one of the most well-known writers of the 20th century, a public figure and a talented postmodern writer, has always known how to make use of all the techniques of the time, in order to make the world know of the atrocities of WWII, of the new religions, of the new science and technology, of global warming, of new politics, etc. His novels are not only grand narratives of the time, but also means where he mastered his humor. Humor itself served this author as a technical breakthrough. Throughout his art, he has mixed the moral thoughts with the most interesting forms of slapstick comedy. Absurdity, jokes, comedy, mockery served him to make what he makes best, black humor. Nothing more than his novels, like "Slaughterhouse-Five", "Cat's Cradle", "Mother Night", etc, can demonstrate what black humor is. His device becomes innovative, because he gives to this element his unique kind of humor. Very often compared to that Mark Twain, he always knew how to make it his own. However, humor is not only a device of the narration, but it becomes an important element even in structure. We can mention, for example, the way he chooses to name the chapters, or the play he does with the symbolic titles. Their novels are galleries of different characters, different devices and elements, that humor makes them together to give the best image of Vonnegut's view of the world.

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