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# The Laughter That Kills: A Critical Look at Black Comedy in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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## Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* employs black humour as a potent tool to critique the absurdities and horrors of war. By exploring the intricate relationship between Vonnegut's writing techniques and the representation of war in his novel, the present article questions the proposition that black comedy could effectively instigate significant social or political change, arguing that despite its potential for critique, humour may inadvertently blur the lines between dissent and complicity, encouraging passive spectatorship rather than active moral engagement. We aim to demonstrate that while black comedy provides a powerful tool for grappling with the absurdity of war, its use also risks trivializing the profound moral and existential implications of conflict. This may undercut the urgency of its anti-war message, foster a distorted understanding of human condition and create a dissonance between the absurdity of war and the gravity of its consequences. Ultimately, it may even frame suffering as a source of amusement.

**Keywords:** Black Comedy, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Trivialization, Desensitization, Cynicism, Passivity

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## 1. Introduction

Black Comedy, originating from the French term "humour noir," was introduced by Surrealist theorist André Breton in 1935 during his examination of Jonathan Swift's works (Real, 2005). Breton recognized Swift's writings as a unique subcategory of comedy and satire, marked by a cynical and sceptical tone that frequently incorporated themes of death and absurdity (Leclair, 1975). Black comedy, a genre that interweaves humour with themes that are traditionally considered serious, morbid, or taboo, serves as a significant lens through which societal anxieties and cultural commentary could be explored. The juxtaposition of humour against grim subjects has found expression historically in various artefacts, ranging from Shakespeare's tragedies laced with humour and the satirical works of Jonathan Swift to the works of 20th century playwrights like Samuel Beckett and filmmakers such as Stanley Kubrick, who utilized the absurd to confront the human condition. The evolution of the genre has been notably influenced by socio-political contexts, particularly during periods of unrest or existential crisis, where humour becomes a coping mechanism as its structural foundation relies on paradoxical setups that challenge normative moral boundaries. The use of incongruity which juxtaposes the grotesque with the mundane often elicits laughter as a response to discomfort and compels audiences to confront their own menacing taboos and abhorring deficiencies less reluctantly. By addressing controversial topics through a comic lens to mitigate their severity, it opens up dialogues that may otherwise be deemed unacceptable. The defiance against despair allows individuals to keep a safe distance from painful realities, providing

a protective psychological buffer. To illustrate, Freud (1927) without making any specific reference to black humour underscores its mechanism in his essay *Humour* when he observes that

The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (p. 162)

Here, he highlights the way humour can serve as a shield in navigating life's darkest moments. Sypher, in a like manner, states "to be able to laugh at evil and error means we have surmounted them" (Zhou, 2006, p. 132).

However, although black comedy retains a vital position in contemporary discourse, transcending mere entertainment to function as a reflective medium of societal values and norms and to empower marginalized voices, its balancing functionality raises ethical questions about taste, boundaries, and the risk of trivialization. In other words, along with its cathartic potential through laughter, we need to take heed of its threatening capacity for desensitization, where repeated comic exposure may dull sensitivity to the very issues that are being lampooned. The fine line between humour and insensitivity could lead to controversy, especially when addressing topics such as race, gender, or war. The creators, therefore, must navigate these complexities with care, ensuring that their work culminates in a deeper understanding rather than alienation. As Lewis (1993) cautions, the relieving nature of gallows humour is contingent upon the context in which the joke is delivered - specifically, whether it is spoken by the person facing the threat or by an external party.

Kurt Vonnegut is often celebrated for his innovative use of black comedy in his acclaimed *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the present article, I aim to argue that while this approach can serve as a powerful critique of social norms and human behaviour, it also carries the risk of yielding undesirable results. By wrapping themes of war, death, and existential despair in humour, Vonnegut may inadvertently diminish the gravity of these subject. The laughter elicited by his comedic portrayals can obscure the real suffering experienced by individuals affected by war, thus trivializing their experiences and undermining the moral imperative to engage with these issues. In other words, his employment of gruesome imagery and outrageous scenarios to generate laughter could numb readers to the realities of violence. This desensitization could create a dangerous narrative where the exigency of human suffering is met with indifference and no empathetic engagement. Moreover, the relentless absurdity and moral ambiguity present in his novel can leave readers feeling disillusioned, as they grapple with a worldview that renders meaning elusive and human values questionable. This cynicism can, in turn, hinder constructive discourse and discourage proactive engagement with societal challenges, as individuals may feel that their efforts are ultimately futile against the backdrop of an absurd world. Therefore, a balanced appreciation of Vonnegut's literary achievement necessitates a critical examination of the implications of his humour, urging a deeper consideration of its social and moral ramifications.

In an age where information is instantaneously available and often sensationalized, and as societies are grappling with ongoing conflicts such as the wars in the Middle East, the crisis in Ukraine, or issues surrounding immigration, understanding the influences and responsibilities behind literary techniques has become increasingly pressing. From memes about political situations to satirical news programs, today, humour remains a prevalent vehicle for discussing modern conflicts. This analysis of Vonnegut's work could serve as a cautionary reminder for creators about the potential ramifications of misusing humour in different forms of narration, and could contextualize how such literature and media permit societies to deconstruct trauma, sometimes at the cost of overshadowing the deep human sufferings involved.

## 2. Discussion

Central to Vonnegut's exploration of war and its consequences in his illustrious work *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the author's liberal use of dark humour and irony. While these literary devices serve to highlight the absurdity and senselessness of war, they also raise questions about the effectiveness of such a comedic approach and its ethical implications in addressing such a serious topic and conveying the horrors of conflict. In other words, the pervasive utilization of irony that is supposed to dismantle the often romanticized notions of heroism and valour associated with warfare and illuminate the absurdity inherent in its institution, could also be seen as a double-edged sword by presenting war in a jocular manner instead of fostering a visceral response to its atrocities. As such, the dominant humorous tone could obscure the gravity of the situations being discussed, leading readers to distance themselves from the raw emotional weight of the narrative. In fact, when laughter punctuates descriptions of tragedy and destruction, it risks trivializing the profound suffering endured by those who lived in such horrific contexts. Vonnegut could, in all likelihood, though inadvertently, dilute the seriousness of the subject matter and undermine the severity of the critique he may seek to offer against the backdrop of World War II and its aftermath.

As mentioned, Billy Pilgrim's detached, passive response to the horrors he faces serves as a focal point for Vonnegut to undermine the traditional notions of heroism and bravery that often characterize war narratives. However, by reducing these experiences to a series of absurdities, Vonnegut creates a dissonance between his critique of war and the moral imperatives that emerged from it and does reinforce a fatalistic view of human behaviour, where individual agency is eclipsed by irony and resignation. This approach while offering a stark and realistic depiction of the psychological toll of war, diminishes the recognition of humanity's resilience and nobility in the face of overwhelming brutality and thus disregards the heroic actions of individuals who responded to the tragedy with acts of courage, selflessness and compassion. In other words, this perspective can obscure a deeper understanding of how the war catalysed movements toward humanitarianism, civil rights, and the fight against fascism, values that were hard-fought and remain deeply relevant. Therefore, it could be argued that rescue workers risking their lives to save survivors, civilians offering shelter to the displaced, soldiers saving their comrades under enemy fire,

and countless acts of kindness and defiance in the face of unimaginable devastation are all at the risk of being marginalized by the novel's focus on humour and absurdity.

Moreover, Vonnegut's comic approach serves as a levelling force that diminishes the distinctions between protagonist and antagonist to resonate with his overarching critique of war as a ridiculous enterprise that dehumanizes all involved. By presenting both sides with equal doses of absurdity and moral ambiguity, he invites readers to question the very nature of good and evil in the context of war. However, the novel's reliance on black humour to question traditional notions of heroism and morality ultimately undermines the crucial distinction between the perpetrators of war and its victims and by blurring these lines, the novel, despite its good intentions, risks creating an ethical and political void, equating the right and wrong sides of the conflict, thereby offering a distorted and ultimately dangerous understanding of the historical realities of the World War II. To put it another way, Vonnegut's absurdist lens extends to both Allied soldiers and their enemies, leading to a portrayal that diminishes the ethical implications of their actions. This reductionist view which tends to depict German forces as bumbling figures rather than as agents of a regime responsible for horrific atrocities risks trivializing the real suffering inflicted by the Nazi regime while simultaneously diluting the moral standing of the Allied forces. In a landscape where right and wrong are treated with equal derision and where ethical considerations become secondary to existential absurdity, the novel could create an untenable moral relativism which fosters a superficial understanding that equates all actions on both sides within the theatre of war as equally meaningless. Acknowledging these distinctions is essential to understanding the full moral spectrum of human behaviour in wartime, a task that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, despite its brilliance, ultimately sidesteps.

It should be noted that one could even go further to contend that a closer inspection of Vonnegut's narrative reveals a troubling tendency to satirize the representatives of the Allied forces more harshly than their Nazi counterparts. Vonnegut employs a distinctive narrative technique that foregrounds the absurdity of war more through experiences of characters such as Billy Pilgrim and Roland Weary. Accordingly, the American soldiers in the novel are frequently depicted as helpless, inept caricatures, embodying traits that invite mockery. However, a significant disparity appears in the treatment of German and Allied soldiers. The author's less satirical and, at times, sympathetic portrayal of the German military, contrasted with a sharper satirical edge directed towards Allied forces is concerning. By not casting the German soldiers in a similarly absurd or ridiculous light, the narrative choices suggest an allegiance to a more palatable understanding of the enemy, one that avoids confronting the full scope of German complicity in the war's atrocities. In fact, the few Nazi characters present often serve as antagonists without the same level of scrutiny or complexity. In the same vein, the novel's emphatic portrayal of the Allied bombing seems to minimize the historical context of the event. It should not be forgotten that the Dresden bombing, while a tragic event, was a strategic military operation conducted against a regime responsible for the systematic murder of millions of innocent people. Hence, by focusing on the absurdity and shortcomings of Allied forces while relegating Nazi soldiers to simplistic roles, Vonnegut may unintentionally create a false sense of moral equivalence between the Allied forces and the Nazi regime that overlooks the vast gulf in their culpability. While it is crucial to criticize all aspects of war including the flaws of those fighting for just causes, the risk lies in allowing the portrayal of the enemy to fade into the background.

The idea that American soldiers would resort to violence against one another far from home appears nonsensical to German soldiers. The juxtaposition of one soldier attempting to murder his comrade while the victim laughs underscores the surreal nature of their conflict and suggests a disconnect or a breakdown in the psychological state of American soldiers, which can make them appear foolish or irrational in the eyes of their adversaries. Their "curiosity" indicates that they are trying to understand the motivations and psyche of the Americans, which might suggest a level of superiority or clarity that they possess over their bewildered American counterparts. Similarly, American captives are shown as forming a "fool's parade" which suggests that they are not only out of place but also lacking in dignity and competence. The Germans perceive them as inept and poorly prepared for the realities of war and as a source of amusement, contrasting sharply with the expected image of a powerful and well-equipped army. The presence of a German war correspondent taking pictures of Billy's and Weary's feet and the wide publication of the picture further emphasizes this point.

As evident, The German soldier's action of measuring Billy's upper arm with his thumb and forefinger signifies a mocking assessment of Billy's strength, or lack thereof. This demonstrates the German's contempt, as they question the judgement of an army that would send someone they consider clumsy to the front lines. Of course, many American forces are in fact "nearly as bad" as Billy. Also, Billy's ill-fitting overcoat, which splits and transforms into a comical vest, serves as a visual metaphor for his inadequacy and vulnerability. The fact that the Germans find Billy's appearance "one of the most screamingly funny things" they have encountered during the war clearly highlights their perception of American soldiers as laughable and pitiable figures. On the contrary, the description of German reserves as "violent, windburned, bristly men" with "teeth like piano keys" evokes a raw, rugged image that implies both their harshness and their readiness for battle. Moreover, the German major's camaraderie with the English prisoners indicate a sense of sophistication and civility that he associates with them, while simultaneously casting a shadow on the Americans, who he regards with condescension. He apologetically refers to Americans as an inconvenience and his assurance that they would be shipped off to Dresden "as contract labor" underscores his dismissive attitude toward them and characterizes them as mere tools or expendable resources rather than individuals with agency or dignity.

Above all, Vonnegut uses Howard W. Campbell, Jr.'s monograph to convey a deep-seated disdain for American people, illuminating their self-loathing and societal dysfunction. He highlights the paradox of a wealthy nation populated by individuals who feel inadequate and blame themselves for their poverty. This internalized shame manifests in the behaviour of American soldiers, who, lacking self-respect, become self-pitying and incapable of forming cohesive bonds with one another. Campbell

contrasts the American military's treatment of its enlisted men with that of other armies, which strive to instil a sense of pride and integrity. Their frumpy appearance symbolizes their broader societal neglect and reflects their internal struggles. They are described as "sulky children" wishing for death rather than camaraderie and this isolation exacerbated by their disdain for any leadership among themselves further illustrates their inability to unite or act collectively. Also, the contempt expressed by officers towards enlisted men is portrayed as genuine hatred rather than theatricality.

It should be noted that *Slaughterhouse-Five* has encountered numerous attempts at censorship, often justified by its irreverent tone, explicit content, depictions of sexuality, the use of profanity, and perceived heretical elements. However, one could compellingly argue that the underlying impetus for its extensive censorship is rooted in its critical stance towards American values and actions, particularly its anti-American sentiment. This perspective highlights the novel's challenge to dominant narratives surrounding patriotism and military engagement, suggesting that such critiques may be more threatening to certain audiences than the controversial content itself.

Equally important, by suggesting that characters like Billy Pilgrim are mere victims of a predetermined fate, Vonnegut, though inadvertently, absolves them - and by extension, society - from accountability for their actions. This perspective could be particularly insidious in the context of war, where ethical considerations are often overshadowed by a sense of inevitability. If war is viewed as an unavoidable aspect of human existence, it could lead to a collective acceptance of violence as a necessary evil rather than a moral failure and could likewise stifle all critical discourses around war and limit efforts aimed at prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. It is imperative for readers and society at large to reject fatalism in favour of a more proactive stance - one that recognizes the potential for change and champions efforts to confront and dismantle the structures that perpetuate conflict. Along with its challenging stance on heroism manifested by characters' passivity, the novel offers no clear alternative. This ambiguity, further amplified by the dark comedic tone, while perhaps offering a temporary escape from the backbreaking burden of responsibility, ultimately undermines the call for action and could effectively paralyze emotional and political responses. The very notion of "so it goes" then becomes a refrain for acceptance of grim realities and denying human's sense of agency. No doubt, in an era where the implications of violence and global conflict are more pronounced than ever, the novel's adoption of fatalistic Trafaladorian stance cultivates a not only disheartening but dangerously reductive and apathetic mentality to excuse the systematic failures that lead to war.

To add to this, Vonnegut's underlying cynicism regarding human nature and his recurring assertion that individuals are bound to repeat their mistakes in a doomed cyclicity completely threaten to question the potency of his anti-war message. Rather than serving as an incentive, his nihilism could breed apathy and by placing humanity's failings at the forefront and framing them as inescapable, he unconsciously sidelines with voices and movements that strive for a better, more peaceful world. Rather than resigning to the notion that we are mere spectators within our narratives in an eternal recurrence, we must learn to harness our understanding of the past to actively engage in the present to envision a future where peace is not just a wistful hope, but a realistic and achievable goal. We should bear in mind that countless individuals and communities have risen from the ashes of conflict, working tirelessly to instigate change and alter the fate of humanity.

Besides, it is noteworthy that Vonnegut's novel crafts a narrative that intricately weaves the psychological struggles and traumas of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, into the larger fabric of war and its consequences. While this focus on individual suffering is undeniably poignant and serves to humanize the experience of wartime trauma, it could also raise critical concerns about the broader collective implications of war itself. Such an individualistic approach could lead to a moral disengagement, where the audience acknowledges and sympathizes with Billy's pain but fails to confront the systematic injustices and political and ideological machinations that lead to war in the first place. As a result, to fully grasp the implications of war, it is essential to balance personal narratives with a wider examination of the social and political dynamics at play.

Finally, by disjointing the sequence of events and presenting the protagonist as unstuck in time, Vonnegut sacrifices the traditional build-up of suspense and the cathartic power of shock that could elevate the reader's understanding of the true horrors of war. In fact, while the sudden shifts in time and perspective may mirror the chaotic nature of trauma, it could also make it challenging to fully process the gravity of each situation the characters encounter and war rather than a harrowing reality that carries weight and consequence becomes an abstract concept. To further explain, the narrative structure, though innovative, often leaves the audience feeling detached from the very atrocities that should elicit a visceral response. Instead of experiencing the gradual escalation of tension and the weight of impending doom, readers are confronted with a myriad of fragmented moments that dilute the emotional stakes of each scene. The linear progression of terror is constantly fractured through moments of mundane life or fleeting reflections which do rob the audience of the build-up and the accompanying shock that such tragic events deserve. Our brains are wired to process information in logical sequence, typically cause-and-effect. When a story jumps ahead to an effect before revealing the cause, it disrupts this natural flow, leaving the reader feeling confused and disconnected from the narrative and without any foundation to build emotional resonance. Although the technique could be used as a means to pique the reader's curiosity wondering what caused the effect, the impact of the effect would be considerably lessened.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on the arguments outlined above, by holistically examining the use of black comedy in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it becomes evident that while such humour can serve as a poignant critique of the absurdities of war, it also carries the potential for dangerous misinterpretation. The potential for desensitization, the trivialization of suffering, and the erosion of the call to action against war are threats inherent in this approach. Although Vonnegut's intentions are noble, his

choice of black humour might eventually undermine the message he strives to convey as the laughter, however dark and unsettling, might inadvertently silence the cries for peace and justice, leaving the reader with a sense of despair rather than a call to action. This duality poses a significant challenge for readers and creators alike, necessitating a careful balance between satire and sensitivity. While black comedy can provoke thought and discussion, it must be wielded with care, ensuring that the voices of those affected by war are not overshadowed by laughter but instead amplified through empathy and understanding. Also, as we navigate the complexities of war narratives, it is vital to remain vigilant about the implications of humour and to ensure that, rather than fostering complacency, our artistic expressions encourage reflection, activity, and ultimately, a deeper realization of the devastations wrought by conflict.

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