

# Vonnegut's duty-dance with death-theme and structure in Slaughterhouse-five.

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Vonnegut's duty-dance with death-theme and structure in Slaughterhouse-five

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1979 (English) Doctoral thesis, monograph (Other academic)

**Abstract [en]**

The influence of Vonnegut's didactic purpose of writing on the treatment of theme and structure in Slaughterhouse-Five is investigated in this study. The following elements of structure are studied: point of view, the treatment of time, characterization, the use of other sources, and imagery. These are constantly related to the novel's themes, such as war, cruelty, death, time, innocence, survival, free will, fantasy and regeneration. Since Vonnegut himself survived the Dresden bombings during World War Two, his novel is very personal, which is particularly reflected in his point-of-view technique, the subject of Chapter One. Vonnegut creates double narrators in Slaughterhouse-Five: a personal one, including authorial intrusions, and an impersonal one. This division is a direct reflection of the dichotomy between reality and fantasy that prevails in the novel. In Chapter Two, Vonnegut's treatment of time is demonstrated to be a process of spatialization. Structurally, this means a fragmented narrative split into several time levels that chiefly form what the author calls his "telegraphic schizophrenic" style. Thematically, the protagonist comes "unstuck" in time, thus succeeding in confronting an absurd world and finally transcending death. Vonnegut uses the depiction of character mainly to express ideas and to reinforce themes, since he regards his characters as "bugs in amber," involuntarily stuck, excepting their capacity for fantasy. To facilitate the reader's recognition of these sketchy characters, Vonnegut has equipped them with marks of recognition, often repeated, and names that provide clues to their personalities. All characters are shown to be isolated and lonely, except

on Tralfamadore where a dream world exists. In the fourth chapter, Vonnegut's use of other sources is examined. His carefully chosen quotations fall into two groups: first, historical sources that verify facts, such as the Dresden catastrophe; second, fictional sources that stimulate the human imagination, which turns out to be the protagonist's means of survival. Finally, imagery in Slaughterhouse-Five, studied in Chapter Five, is found to be used for enrichment of a style otherwise characterized by great economy. Much of the imagery strikes a humorous tone. A simple, quotidian vocabulary is developed. War imagery is used to deglorify war. Animal imagery is invoked to ridicule and to show man's true place in the universe. Several oxymora further reinforce the incongruity prevailing in the Vonnegutian world. The negative effect of imagery is also found in symbols pertaining to Billy's life situation. As a contrast, however, there are also positive symbols emphasizing nature's annual cycle of rebirth signifying hope and regeneration. Many of the stylistic elements studied reveal that Vonnegut has chosen thematic and structural solutions that make his novel accessible to a large reading audience. The fragmented, at times circular, structure of Slaughterhouse-Five is indeed a "dance with death." In a thematic sense, death is the writer's own muse that he must dutifully dance with in order to create his work of art. Slaughterhouse-Five is not only Vonnegut's account of his own war experience but also a statement on the human condition.

**Place, publisher, year, edition, pages**

Umeå: Umeå universitet , 1979. , p. 138

**Series**

Umeå studies in the humanities, ISSN 0345-0155 ; 26

**Keywords [en]**

Didactic purpose, theme, structure, point of view, characterization, use of sources, imagery

**National Category**

Languages and Literature

**Identifiers**

URN: [urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-131600](http://nbn.se/umu:diva-131600) ISBN: 91-7174-031-7 (print) OAI: oai:DiVA.org:umu-131600 DiVA, id: [diva2:1075108](http://diva2:1075108)

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