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### SECTION 29. Literature. Folklore. Translation Studies.

## ATYPICAL MILITARY METAFICTION ABOUT WAR

**Abstract:** This article describes the characteristic features of anti-war novel by Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Slaughterhouse number five, or the Crusade of Children" and the author's personal thoughts and attitude towards the war.

**Key words:** military metafiction, war, novel, Kurt Vonnegut.

**Language:** English

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### Introduction

On May 29, 1945, 21 days after the Germans had surrendered to the victorious Allied armies, a father in Indianapolis received a letter from his son who had been listed as "missing in action" following the Battle of the Bulge. The youngster, an advance scout with the 106th Infantry Division, had been captured by the Germans after wandering behind enemy lines for several days. "Bayonets," as he wrote his father, "aren't much good against tanks." Eventually, the Indianapolis native found himself shipped to a work camp in the open city of Dresden, where he helped produce vitamin supplements for pregnant women. Sheltered in an underground meat storage locker, the Hoosier soldier managed to survive a combined American/British firebombing raid that devastated the city and killed an estimated 135,000 people – more than the number of deaths in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. After the bombing, the soldier wrote his father, "we were put to work carrying corpses from Air-Raid shelters; women, children, old men; dead from concussion, fire or suffocation. Civilians cursed us and threw rocks as we carried bodies to huge funeral pyres in the city." [2].

### Materials and Methods

After the Victory in Europe in May 1945, this prisoner called Kurt Vonnegut was transferred to the United States and got his honorable discharge in July 1945.

During his long life he wrote 14 novels. The first - "Mechanical piano" - was published in 1952, the last one - "Timequake" - in 1997, in addition, a lot of short stories, essays, plays. Critics have found in his books a unique fusion of fantasy, philosophy, black humor and emotional publicism. He, calling himself a pessimist, nevertheless admitted: "What I always tried to do is to look for things for which it is worth living in this world. In fact, it can be said that my whole life consists of small insights."

Kurt's study at the Eastern University was interrupted by US's entry into the World War II. "I was flunking everything by the middle of my junior year," he admitted. "I was delighted to join the army and go to war" [2]. In January 1943, he volunteered for military service. Although he was rejected at first for health reasons – he had caught pneumonia while at Cornell – the Army later accepted him and placed him in its Specialized Training Program, sending him to study mechanical engineering at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and at the University of Tennessee [2].

Some have wondered how Vonnegut, who stresses pacifism in his work, could volunteer so eagerly to go to war. It is a question even Vonnegut has trouble answering. "As for my pacifism," he has said, "it is nothing if not ambivalent." When he asks himself what person in American history he would most like to have been, Vonnegut admits to nominating none other than Joshua Lawrence Chamberlin, college professor and Civil War hero



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whose valiant bayonet charge helped save the day for the Union at the Battle of Gettysburg.

The army left a prominent imprint on his entire life and work, made him a passionate fighter against the war and was reflected in his novel "Slaughterhouse number five, or the Crusade of Children" which brought him a worldwide fame. The novel was published in 1969, in the midst of the social turmoil in the American society, caused by the Vietnam War. It was then when the country was horrified with the news that American soldiers had massacred the peaceful population of the Vietnamese village of My Lai. Then rioting students took over campuses and the management of universities. In New York, the legendary Woodstock festival was held as a token of loss. And at this time, at the height of public disappointment of the Vietnam War appeared "Slaughterhouse number five", a book that made Vonnegut a symbol of the so-called counterculture of the 60s. Black humor and sharp social criticism have helped the writer create an alternative fantasy world for his characters, many of whom have emerged from his own life. First of all, it concerns the time traveler Billy Pilgrim, especially when he returns to 1945, the third day after the destruction of Dresden. Having survived in Dresden, Vonnegut clearly expressed his attitude to violence and injustice with the words of his hero: "I told my sons not to take part in massacres and not to feel joy or satisfaction when they would hear about the beating of their enemies".

Unlike other patriotic military novels describing the heroes of the war and calling the youth to fight for their Motherland, Kurt Vonnegut never reflected the war in this metafictional novel as worthy for sacrificing lives. The participants were youngsters of the ages 21 and more, and any boy at this age was not supposed to attend war or be killed. This idea is directly revealed in the first chapter of "Slaughterhouse number five" when the writer is having a conversation with Mary O'Hare about the content of the book. Mary was the very person who made the writer to dive into the real essence of the book that he wanted to write. As a whole, the book is about the extensive bombing of Dresden and World War II, but except several episodes from the prisoner life of Billy Pilgrim not any other details were described relating to the war.

And unlike patriotic novels with glorious heroes, the heroes of this novel are, first of all, the British officers who were captured by the Germans. And here again as characters, holders of "spiritual values", helping to give the world a sense, Vonnegut chooses Europeans. He guides readers to a convention familiar to European literature, according to which a true hero captured by enemies in the

hardest conditions of captivity retains a sense of dignity, courage, strength, helps the weak, does not give up attempting to resist, tries to escape, etc. However, this convention borrowed in a ready-made form, does not work in this novel. Already the scene of the appearance of the British destroys it: exhausted by a terrible war hungry Americans meet in the camp for prisoners of war healthy, vigorous, clean and well-fed British officers who greet them with a cheerful song. The British are noble, they have dignity in the presence of the Germans, do not de-bounce - they regularly do exercises, encourage the descended Americans who try to escape. They are respected by the Germans, admiring the spiritual strength and heroism of their enemies.

In this novel the true meaning of heroism lies in its theatricality, in its conditionally-game character. The English, having taken prisoner, arrange endless performances and acting in a role of heroes. The function of spectators, at first, is performed by the Germans, then the Americans. In this performance everything is extremely conditional. As well as it is necessary to heroes, Englishmen bravely overcome all burdens of captivity though there is no necessity as jailers treat them as holiday makers at a resort. Heroes are constantly organizing shoots, doing trenches although everyone knows that they cannot escape from the camp.

This type of heroism is a kind of aestheticization, an attempt to bring a diverse life to the scheme. The world is narrowing down to the scale of the scene where the laws invented by the director-hero do not work in reality. The hero selflessly acts, fascinated by the beauty and drama of his own game. Narcissism, interest in one's own self, which is exclusively invented by himself, isolates the subject, takes him to the space of his schemes and puts above his life. The English officers enjoy the feeling of power, the ability to control the surrounding, to show justice, condescending favor to those whom they include in their world as subordinates. They are happy to play the role of "good wizards" even towards Americans who are deeply despised [2].

In heroism, as in any project of the intellect, exists the principle of violence. Vonnegut explicates this idea by introducing the figure of Roland Weary in the novel. Despite the fact that this character is an American, his thoughts on heroism are of purely English origin: in this case, Vonnegut refers to the military stories of Rudyard Kipling (a collection of "Three Soldiers"). Performed theatricality, vivid characters demonstrated in famous (often romantic) works about the war or adventures achieving glory are completely different as Kipling contrasts, a more democratic understanding of heroism. He depicts the

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“heroism of everyday life” which consists in the conscientious fulfillment by man of his duty. This is an inconspicuous feat of ordinary soldiers, ordinary English (Scottish, Irish) guys who do not perform anything outstanding but honestly pulling on the webbing service, without thinking of glory and reward. In one of his program stories Kipling refers to his "The Three Musketeers", automatically adjusting the reader to the tradition of depicting wars, fights and adventures that Dumas described in his famous novel. However, the expectation of the reader is deceived, because instead of three musketeers, brilliant noblemen, ready for incredible feats, three ordinary British soldiers Mulvaney, Ortheris and Learoyd appear before him, simple and not very literate servants, famous exclusively within their regiment for their “dexterity on all sorts of tricks”. The personality of each of them does not differ in scale. And yet it is on them that the British Empire, so beloved by Kipling, is held. As for the brilliant officers, peers, lords, adventurers, tourists - in short, those who could have acted as Dumas’ heroes - are portrayed by an English writer without special sympathy, petty, stupid and inadequate reality [1].

Along with the philosophy of Christianity, Vonnegut draws attention to a new type of philosophy which is, in sense, Billy Pilgrim’s own religion as he becomes “unstuck in time”. While Christianity may say that fate and free will are the matters of God’s divine choice and human interaction, Tralfamadorianism state that things are and always will be, and there is nothing that can change them. Things happen because they were always destined to be happening. The narrator of the story notes that the Tralfamadorians see time all at once. According to their studies on the planets in universe, Earth was the only place where the concept of free will existed. In short, Tralfamadorian philosophy bases itself on “determinism and passivity” as all time is predestined and whatever will be, will be. No divine hand does exist or can change anything simply because it has already happened or will happen. Using the Tralfamadorian passivity of fate, Billy Pilgrim learns to overlook death and the shock involved with death. Pilgrim claims the Tralfamadorian philosophy on death to be his most important lesson [8, p. 54].

The war for Tralfamadorians is an unfortunate episode of history, an unpleasant incident, a state not peculiar to the universe, not deserving attention. In its turn, Vonnegut discerns in the surrounding world non-presence, emptiness. Reality is always seen to him as absurd, engulfed in the war, even if peace externally reigns everywhere. The Tralfamadorians talk about life, trying to find a semantically rich word that evokes the illusion of presence [4, p.180]. And Vonnegut must give the war, that is, emptiness and

death. It is impossible to talk about them directly, because, having designated absurdity (war), putting it into words, we thereby conceptualize it, forcing it to lose its status [5, p.51]. The only way to write about her is to skip it. In the novel “Slaughterhouse number five” the war corresponds to a gap. Vonnegut never shows the Dresden bombardment. We see what happened before and after it. But the very episode of the bombing, which should have become the core of the novel, its main event in the text is missing. Emptiness remains empty [7]. Her possible verbal equivalent in the novel can only be an absurd word, a meaningless bird chirping, “Futu-fut?” [1].

The narrator, in turn, appears as an absurd man, like Meursault from the story of Albert Camus “Stranger”. His view is almost dehumanized and devoid of stereotypes of European culture, which is emphasized by a special Vonnegutian indifferent intonation. He fixes reality, but does not attempt to interpret it. The author deprives himself of the powers of the all-knowing demiurge, who has authority over the world he created. He dissolves in this world, becomes depersonalized, acquires a third person and, finally, becomes just one of the many characters in the novel. Billy Pilgrim discovers Vonnegut in the toilet, accidentally looking there after a hearty dinner.

“Catch people until they become generals, presidents and senators, and poison their mind with humanism.” - in this way Vonnegut formulated the purpose of his novel. Many people consider that his “Slaughterhouse” has not lost its relevance in our days, when America is still in a war. “I re-read it now and it works just fine.” - says an American writer and critic Alan Cheuse, who teaches the fundamentals of the writer's profession at the University of Mason. The novel has already survived 94 editions, which makes the discussions whether Vonnegut's books survive himself or not, pointless.

The novel “Slaughterhouse number five”, like many other books by Vonnegut, fell into the so-called list of “harmful” in the US, it was seized from libraries with the pretext of contained in them “obscenities”. This prompted the writer to actively engage in the struggle against censorship. “If some people succeeded in achieving their goals, ideas could not be spread over this country.” - Vonnegut said in one interview. “I have always considered one feature of this country very wonderful out of many, that I can say whatever I want, and any other person can say whatever he wants, and then we will compare all possible views and come to some opinion.”

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### Conclusion

Vonnegut wrote funny, at the same time speaking about serious things, says American writer Christopher Buckley. In life he had experienced terrible tragedies: during the war his mother committed suicide; her sister died of cancer, and two days before her husband died in a railway accident; his son had a nervous breakdown. And in 1984, inclined to depression, Vonnegut himself tried to commit suicide. And yet he found in himself the strength and courage to look at life ironically and with humor, to write funny about serious, did not lose the love towards life.

One day he said: "I write every book for years - it all seems to me that I will not finish it ... In general, I do not know what will remain of me and how my children will remember me. The only thing I don't want them to inherit is - I do not want them to live in that darkness, in the depression that my parents lived in. My generation grew up in an atmosphere of wars, destructions, killings and suicides. We need to escape this obsession - get rid of misanthropy, greed, envy, enmity... And I also want my children remembering me not to say: "Yes, our father could perfectly joke, but he was a very sad man..."

On the night of 11 to 12 April, Kurt Vonnegut died in his New York apartment in Manhattan at the age of 84 as he could not recover from a head injury after falling at home a few weeks ago. "One of the

main figures of the American literature of the twentieth century passed away. His books are included into the compulsory reading lists at schools throughout the country." - said NBC. This is not entirely true. Kurt Vonnegut is one of the main figures of the world literature, idol of the youth, a cult writer of the 20th century whose influence on the worldview of post-war generations cannot be overestimated.

"A writer is a hypersensitive cell in a social organism, and this cell must react to those poisonous substances that harm or can damage humanity." - once he said. Though he is not alive, his name and works still reflects the reactions to the threats that can harm the humanity. When reading Kurt Vonnegut's name even fleetly, it is impossible to avoid the association with the war, with his attitude towards the war and its results. His name is a living witness to the destructions and sorrows that war brought to our lives. When the Theater of the Soviet Army staged the "The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim" based on his "Slaughterhouse number five" in 1976, he sent a telegram to the premiere, in which he asked "to put an armchair in the wings for his soul, because his body has to stay at home...". And the signature was "Kurt Vonnegut, a former soldier of the American infantry, personal number 12102964". He never missed a chance to introduce himself as a soldier who witnessed the cruelty himself and made people bear in mind all the horrible consequences over again [5].

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