
Form, Fragmentation, and Resistance: A Close Reading of the Political and Historical Consciousness of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with Postmodern Strategies

Name: LI Jingyi

Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Email: Jingyi.Li024@outlook.com

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Kurt Vonnegut, Postmodern Literature, Historical Awareness, Political Apathy, Slaughterhouse-Five, Historiographic Metafiction, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson	Contemporary criticism, enlightened and led by Fredric Jameson's theoretical framework, frequently portrays postmodern literature as a product devoid of historical consciousness and politically apathetic, emphasizing its fragmented forms and diminished historicity. This paper challenges this view through a close reading of Kurt Vonnegut's <i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> (2000), arguing that its postmodern literary strategies -- non-linear narrative, black humour, and metafiction -- constitute not an evasion but a critical engagement with historical trauma and political violence. Drawing upon Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historical metafiction", it demonstrates how Vonnegut's formal experimentation fosters profound critiques of war, memory, and narrative authority. The novel thus exemplifies how postmodern aesthetics can embody a resistant historical and political consciousness.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 09/15/2025
Revised: 09/26/2025
Accepted: 09/29/2025

1. Introduction

1.1 Current Debates of The Scope

Contemporary critics often see postmodern literature as the product of a lack of historical awareness and political apathy. Fredric Jameson points out that postmodern culture has been characterized by an "increasingly shallow sense of history" (1991, p. 16) and a "waning of affect" (1991, p. 22), and its flatness seems to diminish the depth of the text's engagement with history and politics. In this view, the formal innovations of postmodern literature -- such as fragmented narratives and the emphasis on "mage" and "simulacrum" (1991, p. 16) -- are seen as superficial reproductions of historical

Copyright 2025 by author(s) This work is license under the CC BY 4.0

Doi: 10.64583/r6nzm728



experience and detachment from political issues. Whether such criticism accurately reflects postmodern literature's stance towards history and politics remains open to question. Two inquiries are initially proposed: Firstly, is postmodern literature inevitably mired in historical nihilism and political apathy? Secondly, could *Slaughterhouse-Five* offer a response to this criticism through its distinctive formal practices?

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides a compelling case for addressing these questions. This study argues that such criticisms tend to overlook the formal complexity and deep reflection inherent in postmodern texts. Linda Hutcheon takes a different position, claiming that postmodernism is "resolutely historical" and "inescapably political" (1988, p. 3), and she introduces the concept of "historiographic metafiction" to describe works that are both self-referential and related to historical events (1988, p. 5). Within this context, *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals the constructed nature of historical writing by disrupting linear narrative, while simultaneously reminding readers of the authenticity and inescapable reality of war experiences through its depiction of the Dresden bombing. This embodies the dual dimensions emphasized by the concept of "meta-historical fiction".

1.2 Research Objectives

This study's core argument is that although *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents postmodernist features such as non-linear narrative, black humor, irony, and metafiction, it functions as a "postmodern literature" that re-engages in the understanding of history and the articulation of political stance through its unique form. The novel challenges traditional linear historiography through its temporal fragmentation (Close Reading 3.1), employs black humor and irony to critique the cruelty and absurdity of war (Close Reading 3.2), and mobilizes imagery and symbolic metaphors to reflect deeply on trauma and historical memory (Close Reading 3.3).

1.3 Methodology

This study combines theoretical analysis with close reading, a method rooted in New Critical tradition (Brooks, 1947) but is historically and theoretically contextualized rather than practiced as ahistorical formalism. employing a "concession-turn" structure: it first outlines the critiques raised by Jameson (1991) and other scholars, then introduces Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction theory as an analytical framework (1988). Micro readings of selected passages are interpreted the work of Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001), so as to understand why fragmented form, repetiton,

and metafictional interruption are apt strategies for representing historical trauma. Finally, it demonstrates how *Slaughterhouse-Five* reconstructs historical and political expression within a postmodern aesthetic context, thereby responding to the contention that “postmodern literature inevitably leads to historical nihilism and political apathy”. The study also takes into account that contemporary methodological debates, questioning purely suspicious modes of critique (Felski, 2015), but argues that a historicized close reading efficiently reveals how postmodern form enacts political and historical consciousness.

2. Context: Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Postmodern Literature

2.1 Brief Biography of Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indiana, USA, 67 years after his ancestors emigrated from Germany. The honor and wealth associated with his ancestral profession as architects ended with the conclusion of World War I—amidst widespread anti-German sentiment and legal repercussions in the United States. His habit of writing since childhood sustained his pursuit of literary aspirations until he entered Cornell University to major in biochemistry, where he contributed to *The Cornell Sun*. The same year he enlisted in the U.S. Army, his mother took her own life, becoming the “legacy of suicide” reflected in his portrayal of character deaths. His experience as a prisoner of war in Europe during the February 13, 1945, firebombing of Dresden laid the conceptual groundwork for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After his discharge, he pursued writing relentlessly, continuing to write even through the loss of loved ones. Gradually gaining recognition, he published the novel in 1969, a work that gave him “a feeling of completion” (Reed, 2010).

2.2 The Literary Concept of Postmodernism

The core literary tendency of postmodernism can be summarized as a distrust of metanarratives and the resulting shift in narrative practices. In *La condition postmoderne* (published in English in 1984), Lyotard defines postmodernism as skepticism toward grand theoretical discourses that aim to provide totalizing, ultimate explanations—meaning literature no longer attempts to frame history or reality within a single path or universal truth. The literary characteristics derived from this include: rejecting totalizing narrative approaches (resisting singular meanings through fragmented, juxtaposed, or localized storytelling); emphasizing plural voices and marginalized perspectives (providing a platform for experiences suppressed by

mainstream discourse); and highlighting narrative self-awareness and textual construction (presenting narration as an artificial “pseudo-narrative” to expose its discursive authority). Moreover, the doubt Lyotard refers to carries a political dimension: resistance to consensus and authoritative discourse becomes an ethical and political stance, endowing literary irony, deconstruction, and partial memory with distinct critical functions. It is important to note that Lyotard also cautions us that not all grand narratives have vanished; powerful totalizing discourses persist in real-world politics. Therefore, when employing this theory as an analytical tool, we must acknowledge the explanatory power of postmodern narrative strategies within intellectual and cultural contexts while remaining vigilant to their limitations in addressing social realities.

2.3 The significance of Postmodern Strategies

Accordingly, a close reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* will focus on how it employs a fragmented temporal structure, a self-referential narrative voice, irony, and localized historical representations to both expose the constructed nature of historical discourse and, through formal strategies, give voice to war trauma and marginalized experiences. This approach places postmodern formalism within an ethical examination of history and politics.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Jameson and Fragmentation of Temporality

As Fredric Jameson contends in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, postmodern cultural production is marked by a “waning of affect” and a turn towards surface over depth (1991, p. 10). Postmodern culture presents an unprecedented “sense of depthlessness”, not only reflected in cultural forms dominated by “images” and “simulacrum” but also in theoretical discourse itself (1991, p. 16). Within this cultural logic, our communal connection to “history” is diminishing, as well as the individual’s perception of “time”. Jameson further notes that in the “society of the spectacle”, the “past” is reduced to a patchwork of unconnected “simulacrum” (1991, p. 41), losing its organicity and narrative coherence (1991, p.26). The deeper crisis is that the subject no longer possesses the ability to mobilize historical experience and construct a sense of time as a whole, thus evolving into a fragmented “schizophrenic subject”, whose cultural practices tend to be randomized and haphazard (1991, p. 28). Thus Jameson’s critique reveals the close relationship between the

“diminished sense of history” and “political unconsciousness” within the logic of postmodern culture, constituting one of the most influential aspects of his theory.

This description of the disintegration of subjectivity and the erosion of the sense of history finds its counterpart in postmodern literary texts. For example, Billy Pilgrim’s experience of jumping between different moments in time, and the non-linear view of temporality represented by the Tralfamadorians, exemplify what Jameson calls the “fragmentation of temporality” (1991, p. 16). Such non-linear narrative techniques mean that events such as the Dresden bombing are no longer presented as a coherent whole, but in fractured fragments, interludes, and repetitions. Coupled with the author’s deliberate meta-narrative interventions (e.g. Vonnegut’s first person self-insertion), this further undermines the coherence and authority on which traditional historical narratives rely. Some critics have thus argued that *Slaughterhouse-Five* exhibits tendencies towards escapism or political apathy. For instance, Wepler (2011) contends that the novel’s satire and absurdity may give the impression of downplaying the brutality of war. Similarly, el Diwany (2014) observes that the recurring phrase “So it goes” functions as a dismissive catchphrase, seemingly eroding the significance of death and suffering while indirectly reinforcing this impression of “non-political engagement”. This apparent deconstruction of historical depth and meaning construction renders the text highly susceptible to interpretation as a depoliticized, de-emotionalized narrative stance.

On the surface, such features seem to embody the very cultural logic that Jameson describes, presenting a flat and emotionally detached narrative that confirms postmodernism’s lack of historical depth. The risk, however, in viewing these formal strategies merely as depoliticizing and dehistoricizing lies in overlooking their potential function as critical tools. It is precisely at this juncture that Hutcheon’s theory offers a distinct interpretative direction.

3.2 Hutcheon’s “Historiographic Metafiction”

Yet, is formal fragmentation necessarily politically indifferent? Linda Hutcheon offers a compelling counter-perspective in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. She argues that postmodernism is not defined by evasion, but by “paradox, an insistent historicity, and an inescapable politicality” (1988, p. 3), embodied in “the presence of the past”. On this basis, she introduces the concept of “historiographic metafiction” (1988, p. 5) -- self-reflexive novels that paradoxically engage with history. The significance of this concept lies in its provision of a research

pathway that both accounts for the formal self-consciousness of postmodern literature and reveals that this very self-consciousness constitutes an engagement with history and politics. In other words, form is politics; the use of irony and fragmented narratives does not dissolve history, but rather employs “paradox” to highlight the constructed nature of historical writing.

Historiographic metafiction insists on the shared discursive nature of literature and history, both understood as human constructs dependent on language and ideology. As McHale (1987) observes, postmodern fiction continually blurs the boundaries between history and fiction through deliberate narrative strategies, revealing the narrativability and multiplicity of historical knowledge (p.90). And it could further maintain that the “paradoxical nature” of such texts precisely embodies the political dimension of postmodern writing: it acknowledges that history no longer possesses singular truth while simultaneously offering critical intervention through irony and counter-narrative. Within this framework, the formal strategies of *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be reread as politically charged. Vonnegut’s pervasive irony and fragmented temporality are not “lightweight jokes” but devices that force the reader into a critical engagement with war and memory. Wepler (2011) suggests that Vonnegut’s comic realism simultaneously evokes ambiguity and absurdity while compelling readers to confront the brutality of war; this effect aligns with Hutcheon’s theory, demonstrating that form itself constitutes a political statement. The novel’s temporally displaced structure serves not merely as a narrative device, but also as a reflection upon and re-enactment of war trauma. Thus, through Hutcheon’s lens, *Slaughterhouse-Five* emerges not as an ahistorical or apolitical text, but as a paradigmatic “postmodern historical novel”. Its self-conscious narration, irony, and repetitive refrains destabilize the authority of historical truth while simultaneously demanding a critical reassessment of war, memory, and politics. In this way, Hutcheon’s theory not merely counters Jameson’s charge of postmodern apathy but provides a productive method for analyzing how Vonnegut reinvents the historical novel form.

3.3 Review of Literature

Although Jameson’s theory provides a foundational critique for postmodernism’s potential detachment, Hutcheon’s metafictional model of historical writing offers a more nuanced framework for analysing politically engaged postmodern texts such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Hutcheon contends that such novels “establish and then subvert... narrative conventions” to question how we perceive and represent the past (Hutcheon,

1988, p. 5). This paper further incorporates trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001), arguing that Vonnegut's fragmented narrative mirrors the psychic structure of trauma -- discontinuity, repetition, and intrusion. This theoretical synergy enables us to view the novel's form not as a failure of historical representation but as a critical mode of historical enactment, challenging grand historical narratives through a deliberately subjective and fractured perspective.

4. Close Reading

4.1 Non-linearity Structure and Metafiction Disruption

Approaching from a formal perspective, we must first recognize that the non-linear structure and meta-narrative interventions employed by Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not mere textual experiments, but rather the core mechanisms through which his political stance and historical reflection are realized.

In terms of narrative structure, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s most distinctive feature is its non-linear temporal narrative; Billy Pilgrim jumps randomly between different points in time, as he himself states, "He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, pays random visits to all the events in between" (15). This temporal arbitrariness subverts the linear progression of cause-and-effect logic of traditional historical narratives. As Hooti and Omrani (2011) argue, such structural disjunction destabilizes reader expectations, generating discomfort that paradoxically forces them to confront the instability of historical memory rather than passively accept coherent war narratives. As Jameson notes, postmodern culture exhibits "an increasingly shallow and attenuated sense of history" (1991, p. 16), and Billy's temporal dislocation thus reflects a postmodern reassessment of time, whereby it is no longer regarded as a continuous and uniform entity, but as a symbolic system subject to reconstruction.

This notion is further reinforced in the novel through the Tralfamadorians' view of time. They firmly believe that "when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past...All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist" (16-17). While this philosophy may appear consolatory, its irony lies in exposing the futility of humanity's desire for a coherent historical totality. In Hutcheon's terms, the novel exemplifies "historiographic metafiction", foregrounding that both history and fiction are constructed discourses rather than transparent windows onto truth (1988, p. 19). Billy's fragmented movements -- slipping from 1955 into 1941

and then into 1963 (15) -- underscore the impossibility of narrating history as a unified continuum.

A further manifestation of temporal rupture is the repeated motif “So it goes”, which follows every mention of death. On the surface, this phrase reflects Jameson’s “waning of affect” (1991, p. 10), a gesture of detachment and depthlessness. Yet its mechanical recurrence functions less as indifference than as an ironic ritual. As the repetition produces a numbing effect that paradoxically heightens awareness of the ubiquity of death. Each utterance -- whether describing the petrification of Lot’s wife, the hunting accident of Billy’s father, or the Dresden massacre -- forces readers into confrontation with the absurd normalization of mass death. Rather than trivializing, the refrain insists that death saturates every aspect of wartime existence, resisting any attempt at transcendental meaning.

Equally significant is Vonnegut’s own authorial intrusion, which lays bare the text’s constructedness. For instance:

This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this: Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. It ends like this: “ Poo-tee-weet? ”
(14)

Such metafictional gestures shatter the illusion of objective narration, foregrounding the narrator’s inability to represent catastrophe fully. What might seem absurdist comedy thus becomes an acknowledgment of trauma’s resistance to representation, aligning the novel with Hutcheon’s insight that historiographic metafiction both asserts and undermines history’s claims to truth.

In this light, Vonnegut’s use of non-linear time, ironic motifs, and metafictional disruptions does not signal a retreat from politics or history. Instead, it exposes the fragility of historical discourse, turning formal experimentation into a mode of ethical resistance. Through fragmentation, irony, and self-conscious narrative rupture, *Slaughterhouse-Five* transforms the Dresden massacre into a cultural trauma that resists closure, compelling its readers to wrestle with the uneasy politics of memory.

4.2 Irony, Repetition, and Affective Critique

If the structural fragmentation challenges the conventions of historical writing, then the black humour and irony at the linguistic level constitute a direct response to historical experience itself, embodying the text’s political engagement and emotional tension.

Slaughterhouse-Five is replete with cynicism about military hierarchies, political orders, and the absurd nature of war. For instance, the novel quotes the U.S. Army's verdict of capital punishment for the deserter Slovik, whose bureaucratic and mechanical language repeatedly emphasizes "military discipline" but shows an astonishing indifference to the end of individual life (23-24). This apparent objectivity in quotation actually employs irony to expose the coldness and dehumanisation of the war machine, using its "inevitable political nature" to embody a questioning and dismantling of the existing power structure (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 3).

The repetition of "So it goes" constitutes another emblematic rhetorical device within the novel. Though Jameson might interpret it as reflecting postmodern culture's "flatness and lack of depth" and "the fading of emotion" (4; 7), yet within the text, this mechanical repetition establishes a ritualized cadence, inducing in the reader a numbness of feeling amidst the absurdity of war; the normalization of death resembles more an emotional blunting and self-defence mechanism in the face of extreme trauma. From bidding farewell to multitudes of people, to the creatures frozen to death within their clothes on the Dresden battlefield, their deaths are dismissed with a single phrase: So it goes. This is not an absence of emotion, but an irony that normalizes death, reflecting the emotional numbness individuals experience amidst collective violence. Confronted with traumatic experiences, black humour can serve as a rhetorical device for expressing and processing unspeakable trauma (Caruth, 1996, p. 6), which resonates profoundly with the shadow of war that haunts Billy.

In addition, the novel makes extensive use of black humor, using absurd and ironic language to show the hypocrisy and violent nature of war. Vonnegut likens the marching American soldiers to the "diagrams in a book on ballroom dancing -- step, slide, rest -- step, slide, rest" (22), undermine the solemnity of war through caricatured depictions. Similarly, Billy's memories of his father teaching him to swim -- "His father was going to throw Billy into the deep end, and Billy was going to damn well swim. It was like an execution" (24) -- using the analogy between the brutal experience of growing up and an execution, for a metaphor for the deprivation of individual subjectivity and the polarization of the existential situation in war. When Billy fantasizes about "turning to steam painlessly" (25), he longs to withdraw from physical existence, indicating his despair over the reality of war and symbolizing the gradual disintegration of subjectivity.

Vonnegut further amplifies this absurdity through visually exaggerated metaphors. American prisoners of war are depicted as “a Mississippi of humiliated Americans” (33), revealing the systematic trampling of soldiers’ dignity by war. Meanwhile, likening the American fliers to “high school kids” and Hitler to “a baby” (38) further mocks and dismantles the heroic myths and binary enemy-ally ideologies inherent in war narratives (a political consciousness I believe is strongly linked to Vonnegut’s German-American identity).

The novel’s opening and ending adopt a “detached” tone, also carrying profound anger and helplessness towards war through such ironic and absurd techniques. As Hutcheon points out when addressing Jameson’s critique of so-called “surface humour”, postmodern texts are not emotionally vacuous; their irony often bears weighty political intent -- a reflection on war and a questioning of authority (7; 17). From the standpoint of political aesthetics, the absurd itself may be regarded as a form of critique (Adorno, 1973, p. 362), achieving a rebuttal of historical violence and authoritarian consciousness by deconstructing grand narratives and dismantling hegemonic discourses. Vonnegut harnessed the satirical aesthetics of postmodernism, employing black humour and absurdity as his medium, to deliver a profound critique of war history and foster political reflection.

4.3 Symbolic Imagery and Trauma Representation

The starkness and sarcasm of language ultimately lead to human experience profoundly reshaped by war, a transformation rendered with even greater depth through the novel’s imagery.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, deep historical and political metaphors lie behind the seemingly absurd imagery. Billy Pilgrim was imprisoned by Tralfamadorians in a “simulated Earthling habitat” (57), a setting that symbolizes the objectification of the individual in war and the mechanism of display and control by the state apparatus. The description of the flying saucer “come from nowhere all at once” (38), can be read as a symbolic collection of important experiences in Billy’s life -- the owl optometrist, the Christianity of his mother, the dog he kept as a child, indicating the suddenness and omnipresence of traumatic memories. Billy expected Tralfamadorians to be shocked by the war on Earth, but their response is to cover their eyes, revealing that the alien civilization is unable to understand and chooses to avoid the killing of human beings (59), pointing to the indifference of modern society towards war and violence. As Jameson claims, postmodern culture may present a “new sense of lack of depth” (1991,

p. 16), and this imagery of indifference can be seen as a literary response to this judgment.

Additionally, Montana Wildhack and her sex life with Billy under the zoo dome (57) constitute a metaphorical interweaving of sex, violence, and the desire to watch in the context of war. And this panoramic surveillance style of spatial design reinforces the visualization and objectification of the individual, suggesting that war all-round deprivation of privacy, dignity and even humanity. The indifference of Tralfamadorians further refers to society's numbness to war. The bombing of Dresden, as the central event of the novel, is treated as a fragmented narrative, adopts a strategy of presenting the "in-narratable trauma". As Caruth and LaCapra have explored, it is often difficult to be expressed in traditional narratives, requiring the use of imagery and metaphors to present its ineffable nature (1996, p. 5; 2001, p. 186). Nazi Campbell's interpretation of the American soldier's armband appeared imbued with patriotic fervour: Blue stands for the American sky. White stands for the race that pioneered the continent. Red stands for the blood of American patriots so willingly shed in years gone by (80). This patriotic symbolism appeared hollow and ironic within the absurd theatre of history, standing in stark contrast to the impending total destruction.

Besides, the novel's satire on religion carries profound symbolism. Billy, as "a valet to a preacher", expected no promotions or medals, bore no arms, and held a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most shoulders found putrid (18). The meticulous depiction of wounds in images of Christ's crucifixion instead appeared "pitiful" (21-22), suggesting the fragile, powerless nature of traditional religious belief in the face of war. Billy's mother was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops, and hung a crucifix on Billy's wall (22). This act symbolizes the futility of a wartime society seeking order and meaning amidst ruins, while also underscoring how symbolic structures in postmodern texts assume the substitute duty of representing "real history" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 11).

Overall, these absurd imagery are not meaningless textual fragments, but highly symbolic narrative tools. On the one hand, they respond to postmodern literature's critiques of "anti-historical" tendencies and "political apathy"; on the other hand, they shoulder the ethical responsibility of how postmodern writing employs visual systems to bear historical expression -- using an unspeakable visual language to carry unbearable historical trauma.

4.4 The Subjectivity of Author's Voice and Historical Narrative

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut employs the first-person narrator “I” to directly engage with the core characteristics of what Hutcheon defines as “historiographic metafiction”. She observes that such works are “renowned, widely recognized novels that are intensely self-referential while paradoxically claiming connection to historical events and figures”, aiming through “conscious writing” to “question the relationship between history and truth, truth and language” (1988, p. 5). Vonnegut’s authorial intrusion exemplifies precisely this strategy of “elevating personal experience to the level of public consciousness” and “fusing public, historical elements with personal, biographical elements”.

This strategy directly exposes the novel’s construction process. When the narrator describes a soldier as “He didn’t look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo” (19), this unconventional, almost absurd metaphor itself becomes a form of meta-commentary. Rather than pursuing the realism of war reporting, it deliberately presents characters through a distanced, pictorial approach. This precisely validates Jameson’s critique that postmodern culture constitutes a new cultural form dominated by “image” and “simulacrum” (1991, p. 10). The soldier’s image has been stripped of its historical context and human depth, flattened into a peculiar “quasi-image” exhibiting what Jameson described as “a new flatness and lack of depth” and “superficiality, lack of substance, and absence of depth”. On the surface, this depiction appears to exemplify the “disappearance of emotion” and “absence of depth”.

Nonetheless, Vonnegut’s narrative does not conclude here. For example:

He was so snug in there that he was able to pretend that he was safe at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war—whereas the true war was still going on. (23)

This passage profoundly reveals the essence of historical writing. It becomes a meta-fable about the act of narration: the act of storytelling itself (‘telling a true war story’) is depicted as a means of seeking solace and psychological escape amidst ongoing trauma (‘the real war still raging’). This perfectly embodies Hutcheon’s theory that “history and fiction are both discourses, both constructing systems of meaning through which we manufacture the significance of the past”, and that “it is precisely the narrative design of historical writing—its interweaving of account and commentary on past events—that constitutes what we perceive as historical truth” (1988, p. 5).

In this manner, Vonnegut engages with history through his authorship, yet his participation does not consist in providing a transparent, objective historical record.

Rather, through the narrative of metafiction, he reveals the inherent subjectivity, construction, and strategic nature of historical writing itself. He demonstrates how narrative is employed to shape, and even distort, our experience of the past to serve present psychological imperatives. This does not, as Jameson feared, render history itself “inaccessible” (1991, p. 10), but rather, as Hutcheon countered, constitutes a “rethinking” of history as an “artificial construct” (1988, p. 3). Vonnegut’s work thus constitutes not a “deceptive ploy to evade truth”, but rather fulfills the postmodernist function of “questioning accepted ideas” and “employing this power to achieve its own critique”, offering a profound critique of the historical representation of war through its very form.

5. Discussion

This close reading necessitates a reassessment of the initial critique that postmodern literature is inherently ahistorical and apathetic. The limitations of such a critique, as exemplified by Jameson’s focus on form as symptom, become apparent. While his diagnosis of a “fragmented temporality” and “waning of affect” accurately describes the surface features of a text like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it risks misinterpreting these features as an endpoint -- a mere reflection of a pathological cultural condition -- rather than recognizing their potential as a point of departure for a different mode of political and historical engagement.

Hutcheon’s framework provides this crucial corrective. By positing that postmodernism is “inescapably political” and “resolutely historical”, she shifts the critical focus from what is lost (depth, coherence, affect) to what is gained through formal innovation. The politics of postmodern literature, therefore, reside precisely in its form. In addressing the initial question, it becomes apparent that the techniques employed in postmodern literature -- such as non-linear narrative, black humour, and meta-narrative -- do not constitute a mere evasion of history and politics. Jameson’s analysis of “fragmented time” and shallow historical consciousness helps us understand Billy Pilgrim’s non-linear temporal experience and the Tralfamadorians’ conception of time. While superficially misread as historical dissolution, these elements actually offer a multi-dimensional portrayal of war trauma and individual experience. Hutcheon’s theory of historical metafiction further demonstrates that non-traditional narrative forms can intervene in historical accounts through paradox and self-consciousness,

rendering irony, repetition and the absurd not as markers of emotional detachment, but as potent responses to historical and political issues.

Vonnegut's fragmentation is thus not a withdrawal from history but a polemical argument about history: it challenges the authority of singular, linear, and unified historical narratives. The black humour and repetitive rhetoric of "So it goes" employ emotional numbing and satire to expose the absurdity of war and human powerlessness, thereby achieving the text's portrayal of trauma and critique of historical authority. Symbolic imagery within the novel -- such as Montana Wildhack, the zoo dome, flying saucers, and religious metaphors -- both echoes society's numbness towards war and fulfills an ethical function in historical expression. Collectively, textual strategies and theoretical perspectives mutually corroborate: postmodern formal innovation constitutes a complex engagement with historical trauma, political realities, and individual experience, rather than passive evasion. The contribution of postmodern literature lies in its capacity to question historical monism and make space for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, particularly those shaped by trauma and rupture.

6. Conclusion

In doing so, works like *Slaughterhouse-Five* perform an essential democratic function. They do not offer a clearer or more "true" version of the past but a more critically aware and ethically responsible one. By formally embodying the chaos and subjectivity of memory, they forge a model of public memory that is inherently provisional, contested, and reflective. This does not lead to nihilism but to a more profound and critical form of remembrance, forcing the reader to actively participate in the construction of meaning from the fragments. The political act, then, is the act of formal experimentation itself -- an act that dismantles hegemonic narratives to serve a more critical, inclusive, and vigilant collective reflection.

On the contrary, postmodern literature does not, as some critics contend, evade historical and political issues. Rather, through its formal strategies, it actively engages with the reflection and expression of historical trauma and political realities. Vonnegut's writing practice demonstrates that the "political nature" and "historical perspective" of postmodern literature are not absent, but are presented through non-traditional, non-realist modes of expression. Therefore, we ought to renew our interpretative framework for postmodern literature, recognizing its formal innovations as distinctive linguistic modes of engagement with history and politics, rather than

misinterpreting them as passive evasion of serious issues. *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a paradigm demonstrating how postmodern literature can assume ethical responsibilities towards history and politics while simultaneously pioneering narrative strategies.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1973). *Negative Dialectics* (E.B. Ashton, Trans.) New York: Continuum.
- Brooks, C. (1947). *The well-wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry*. Harcourt: Brace & Company.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Diwany, F. K. M. (2014). *So it goes: A postmodernist reading of Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 5(4), 82–90. <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL2013.0548>
- Felski, R. (2015). *The limits of critique*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hooti, N., & Omrani, V. (2011). *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five: A Postmodernist Study*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(4), 816–822. <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.2.4.816-822>
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Liotard, J. F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.) University of Minnesota Press.
- McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. Routledge.
- Reed, P. J. (2010). *Biography of Kurt Vonnegut*. *Critical Insights: Slaughterhouse-Five*, 8–13.
- Vonnegut, K. (2000). *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. London: Vintage Books.

Wepler, R. (2011). *"I can't tell if you're being serious or not": Vonnegut's Comic Realism in "Slaughterhouse-Five."* Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS), 17(1), 97–126. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43921804>

Author Bio: Jingyi Li is currently pursuing an MA in Literature, Culture and Society at the University of Amsterdam. My research interests include postmodern literature, East-European narrative, and cultural studies; and also write cinema criticism and poetry.