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

Sidita (Hoxhiq) Dano

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. However, nothing could explain black humor — as he called it “gallows humor” — better than Vonnegut did, when he says in Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons: “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.

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This interview with Kurt Vonnegut was originally a composite of four interviews done with the author over the past decade. The composite has gone through an extensive working over by the subject himself, who looks upon his own spoken words on the page with considerable misgivings. . . . indeed, what follows can be considered an interview conducted with himself, by himself. “Vonnegut has chain-smoked Pall Malls since 1936 and during the course of the interview he smokes the better part of one pack. His voice is low and gravelly, and as he speaks, the incessant procedure of lighting the cigarettes and exhaling smoke is like punctuation in his conversation. – Kurt Vonnegut, The Last Interview: And Other Conversations. Along with Stanislaw Lem, Philip K. Dick, and J.G. Ballard the fourth Musketeer in my pantheon of authors is Kurt Vonnegut who awakened me from my own long sleep in ideological Slumberville. Maybe this is the way it will go with humanity as a whole; not for looting a teacup from the atrocity of a bloody war, but from looting the last resources of our planet for profit and pleasure. Vonnegut once stated this about humor: Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself. Finally, you get just too tired, and the news is too awful, and humor doesn’t work anymore. Somebody like Mark Twain thought life was quite awful but held the awfulness at bay with jokes and so forth, but finally he couldn’t do it anymore. Kurt Vonnegut, one of America's outstanding modern authors, certainly dealt with the atrocities of life himself. His experiences during the Great Depression, his childhood, and World War II helped mold his perspective on humanity. Vonnegut's means of coping with these horrific difficulties was to see the humor in the midst of tragedy. Luckily Vonnegut was working in an underground meat locker, somehow emerging to the blasted landscape one of the few survivors. Afterwards, the prisoners were forced to excavate the ruins of Dresden and sniff out the thousands of buried bodies. All of Vonnegut's novels are viewed as attempts to come to terms with Dresden. These rapid and dramatic events had a profound effect on the
attitudes depicted in Vonnegut's novels (Bleiler 553-554).