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## POSTMODERN LANDSCAPES IN *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT:* *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a very complex postmodern novel which, on the surface, aims to tell the story of the firebombing of Dresden; however, the novel should be seen as much more than a novel about history. Asserting itself as history and therefore, reality, while at the same time saying that it is not completely so, is what Linda Hutcheon named historiographic metafiction. The presentation and the idea of reality and metafiction are probably the most important notions of the novel. War creates chaos, and the narration is chaotic; Vonnegut makes parallels between World War II and the Vietnam War through time-travel. By jumping from one timeline to the other, from one war to another, the author creates a non-linear narrative. Rather than trying to make sense of the chaos, Vonnegut embraces it and portrays the brokenness of the world. While he deconstructs the established notions of traditional storytelling, he manages to find an “American voice” which is able to tell a story of the American society.

*Key words:* *Slaughterhouse-Five*, postmodernism, reality, history, war, fiction

### REALITY AND HISTORY

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a very intricate postmodern novel which, on the surface, aims to tell the story of the firebombing of Dresden during World War II. Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden during the bombing in 1945, and he has been trying to write about the senseless massacre for twenty-three years. This is all immediately made apparent to the reader, since the author of the story of Billy Pilgrim explains it in the first chapter of the novel; the author, furthermore, closely resembles Vonnegut, since the events of their lives are very similar, however, the author within *Slaughterhouse-Five* should nevertheless be regarded as a fictional character.

The novel should be seen as much more than a novel about history. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, among other things, a novel about novels, dealing with the very process of creating a work of, for lack of a better word, fiction. The opening chapter

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explains the writer's struggle to deal with a subject he cannot distance himself from, as well as choosing a suitable way of telling a story:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 1).

Going even further, the author gives a commentary on his own writing style and language while providing a reason for it. In other words, he calls the style of writing to attention, inviting the reader to see it as equally important as the story itself, so that one would be able to realize the connection he creates between narration and story. Additionally, to help the reader follow the story more easily, the author (or narrator) provides a brief history of *Slaughterhouse-Five's* protagonist, Pilgrim at the beginning of the second chapter. Pilgrim's life seems ordinary enough: he is born, he goes to war, he goes to school, and so on. What is different is the fact that he is "unstuck" in time, and lives his life out of the traditional chronological order. Pilgrim's own reality is distorted, mirroring the distortion of reality of the narrative itself.

The presentation, as well as the very idea of reality and, subsequently, meta-fiction are probably the most important notions of the novel. The narrator's occasional interruptions of the storyline in which he calls to attention himself as a writer break the boundary between the fictional and the real:

The Americans arrived in Dresden at five in the afternoon. The boxcar doors were opened, and the doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen.[...]

Somebody in the boxcar said, "Oz." That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 6).

The reader distances himself from the work of fiction and realizes that what is being read is real, "more or less." Like Fowles's narrator, who in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* explains how his protagonist is so real that he is unable to control her or write what he wishes, thus creating an environment which convinces the reader to see the novel as real, Vonnegut's narrator fractures the perception of fiction; *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, does not create the illusion of the real. Rather, he emphasizes that what is being written should be history from a new perspective, since what is available on the bombing of Dresden does not satisfy the narrator. Additionally, it portrays the author's inability to influence or change events.

This history is, however, not really history: "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 6). In this lies the problem of defining the real and the fictional in postmodernism, and in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Asserting itself as history, and, therefore, reality, while at the same time saying it is not completely so is what Linda Hutcheon named historio-

graphic metafiction. Claiming to be a true account of the bombing while claiming it is not entirely based on the truth serves to undermine the reader's perception of the truthfulness of any history. In other words, the reader should doubt any account presented as accurate, objective and historical. Hutcheon writes:

Historiographic metafiction is not "ideological novels"[...]: they do not "seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade their readers of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world" (1983, 1). Instead they make their readers question their own (and by implication others') interpretations. They are more "romans à hypothèse" than "romans à thèse" (Hutcheon 2004: 130).

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* does exactly this. The narrator asserts early on that the novel is an anti-war book, therefore not objective and not necessarily the most correct version to ever be written. Even though Vonnegut mentions real people (O'Hare) and real events (Vietnam War), his story is still fiction, or rather, metafiction. Vonnegut does not invite the readers to sympathize or agree with the story, but to find the meaning they are intended to find: history is a creation of man, and it is subject to interpretation, or rather interpretations.

The style of the narrative resembles the distorted vision of reality, or, more accurately, it emphasizes it. Since Pilgrim is unstuck in time, the story is non-linear, past and present events constantly interrupt each other, the paragraphs are often short, and sentences very simple. The style emphasizes the notion that the story is written by a biased, troubled author, who is unable to coherently portray the events of the war, thus reinforcing the idea that what is written is only a new version of history presented many years after its occurrence.

## WARS AND VIOLENCE

To understand that story and its brokenness, one has to understand the proper contexts which surround the novel. McHale, while describing the broken, everyday lives of Americans, constantly interrupted by mass-media fictions which allow them temporary escape from their own lives, asserts that "postmodernist fiction *does* hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural" (McHale, 2004: 39). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut presents various levels of a reality, one that does not have unambiguous boundaries or clarity; this reality mirrors the world he is trying to blur and soften, because it is too violent and cruel.

Published in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, while a portion of the American people was vocally protesting even the idea of a war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was given to the public. Vietnam belongs to a very dark part of the history of the United States, filled with senseless death and suffering for a cause that never seems important enough, one that is never understood. The continuous brutality is never-ending, as World War II does not enforce a long-lasting peace.

Vonnegut makes parallels between World War II and the Vietnam War through time-travel by jumping from one timeline to the other, from one war to another. As previously mentioned, the jumps through time serve to fragment the narrative; when it comes to the parallel of two wars, an additional interpretation comes to mind. Since the narrator makes it clear that his story is an anti-war novel, the reader can interpret the time jumps as a means of escaping from one reality to another. The devastating nature of World War II proves to be a shattering experience for the narrator, and he keeps escaping the terrible landscape of concentration camps to a later time. This other time proves to be no more pleasant, since the Vietnam War keeps claiming lives of boys who need to fight for ideologies beyond their level of understanding. The cycle of violence and the meaninglessness of death that Vonnegut marks with a catch-phrase “So it goes” seem to be at the center of the novel, as well as in the minds of the public.

This backdrop, one of both wars, is what encourages a very postmodern analysis of the novel. Jarvis explains:

*Space, place and landscape[...]* Each of them denotes not a fixed and static object so much as an ongoing process, a spatial praxis. Spaces are not simply the passive backdrop to significant sociohistorical action, rather they are a vital product and determinant of that action. ‘[Space is] not merely an arena *in which* social life unfolds but a medium *through which* social life is produced and reproduced’ (Jarvis 1998: 6-7).

Jarvis’s idea that the landscape is influenced by ideology, in Vonnegut’s case one of war and chaos, would make Vonnegut’s novel a timeless classic, since war never changes, never disappears, and, as history would teach, it only becomes more violent. The Moon-like surface of Dresden after the bombing depicts the wasteland of humanity itself or, as Jarvis suggests, that wasteland is the “product” of humanity; since Vonnegut is not able to make sense of the death and destruction, it is also a wasteland of dreams of a better tomorrow and hope for progress. Moreover, like the Vietnam War after World War II, war will keep happening and that makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* forever relevant.

This is what the style of the novel depicts as well. War is chaos, and the narration is chaotic. Rather than trying to make sense of the chaos, Vonnegut embraces it and portrays the brokenness of the world, where “brutality rules in the place of reason” (Bloom 2007: 23), through a broken narrative. Additionally, Vonnegut never tries to rationalize the bombing of Dresden, nor does he show the guilty and the innocent. The narration that is constantly being interrupted by jumping through time and space serves to avoid the establishment of causality by clearly presenting events in chronological order.

As Vonnegut remembers the horrors he has seen, he staunchly refuses to try to explain how the bombing of Dresden could be justified [...]. The idea behind chron-

ological time as an organizing principle finds its impetus in our desire to show the orderly progression of “history” (Boon 2001: 158).

The waste of the landscape is thus connected to the waste of narration since both serve to portray the same mindset, one that refuses coherence.

The United States of America has been Balkanized, has been divided into twenty petty nations so that it will never again be a threat to world peace. Chicago has been hydrogen-bombed by angry Chinamen. So it goes (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 6).

The once great nation in the Land of Plenty, a country with not just a dream but the American Dream has to be fragmented for the good of humankind, because fragmentation is the only option Vonnegut sees for survival. The apparent bombing of Chicago only reinforces the idea that violence is the reason behind fragmentation. Vonnegut’s narrative, from this perspective, is not a deconstruction of the novel, but a new kind of presentation of a novel. In a new world with new problems, a new form is required by which a story can be told.

The story set in such a landscape purposefully avoids the glorification of death and war from the opening of the novel:

“Mary,” I said, “I don’t think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. [...] If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne.”

“I tell you what,” I said, “I’ll call it ‘The Children’s Crusade’” (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 1).

In Vonnegut’s vision, all the soldiers are boys, not men, and fight wars that they barely comprehend. That is why he calls attention to children, who fight for causes, to them, unknown. He does this in order to show the sadness and terror of war, rather than what Hollywood usually portrays. Being an integral part of the American tradition, Hollywood has always been there to justify and explain the unexplainable. Boon notices:

With her references to Frank Sinatra and John Wayne, Mary’s remarks are intended as a specific critique of World War II films like *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *From Here to Eternity*, which present rugged, maverick, thoroughly masculine heroes (Boon 2001: 64).

This is one of the reasons why Billy Pilgrim is, not only young, but very much the opposite of a rugged, masculine hero. Hollywood tends to create the illusion of greatness in its war films, forgetting reality and ignoring the real corpses of real people left behind in wars. The narrator openly criticizes this propensity having previously felt the horrors of war. Additionally, he offers a critique of the American society, who feeds off the notion of greatness of their country through Hollywood, seeing that Americans are usually victorious in the great war epics, either morally or literally. It is, therefore, tragic, that Hollywood makes money by selling euphemisms of death and destruction in such war films. Finally, by referencing *The Three Musketeers*, charming, noble and great heroic characters and comparing them to the

bully Weary and two scouts he meets in Luxemburg, he shows that there really are no great heroes in war. All that death and tragedy is what ultimately makes the writer insert his comic relief catch-phrase “so it goes,” because it seems unimaginable that death is so easily marketable.

#### GENRE PLAY IN A STORY WITHOUT CHARACTERS

Written as a satire, it cannot be said that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a science fiction novel, but rather as a novel with elements of science fiction. Although critics have tended to marginalize Vonnegut as a writer of pulp fiction and cheap thrills, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, among others, clearly establishes itself as a serious work of fiction with its multi-faceted nature, thus proving beyond a doubt that Vonnegut is a serious writer.

Science fiction is generally used as a means to criticize various sociopolitical and philosophical ideas, or for representation of imaginative technologies. Although critics have often been reluctant to accept science fiction novels as important and serious literature, many examples of great novels stand to prove the opposite. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* provides a harsh criticism of capitalism as well as a Baudrillardian vision of mass media and American culture. Gibson’s *Neuromancer* offers a fresh view on the connection between technology and humans while defining an entire generation connected to cyberspace.

Vonnegut, as previously mentioned, implores certain elements of science fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, one being time-travel, which aims to de-linearize the novel; the broken chronology destabilizes the reality the novel’s narrator creates. In addition, he introduces an alien race, the Tralfamadorians, who view time and the concept of free will differently than human beings. More importantly, however, he uses science fiction to employ a recurring character of his fiction, Kilgore Trout.

Trout is based on Vonnegut’s colleague, a science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon; however, Trout is probably another version of Vonnegut within the novel, which is to be discussed later on. Trout is the author of several novels in Vonnegut’s fiction; these novels present a means of introducing an additional metafictional layer to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Seven Trout’s novels are mentioned, and most serve a higher purpose, thus offering yet another point of view for interpretation.

One of these novels deals with a money tree:

It had twenty-dollar bills for leaves. Its flowers were government bonds. Its fruit was diamonds. It attracted human beings who killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 8).

Calling to mind the Biblical tree of knowledge of good and evil, among other possible interpretations, this intertextual play does not reference the serpent as the cause of the fall of man. The tree being a money tree means that capitalism is the evil that corrupted these humans. It is then explained that human beings exerted the

punishments themselves, and no expulsion from paradise takes place. Capitalism, the driving force behind the Vietnam War, has seen many criticisms in fiction, from Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* to Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. In fact, the center of Hemingway's novel is the post-war economic depression and the exploitative nature of capitalism, where "those who *have not* articulate powerlessness as a source for discontent," while "those who *have* seem unconscious to their own powerlessness within a system that binds and terrorizes both the *haves* and *have nots*" (Frederking 2010: 174). Le Guin, on the other hand, invites society to find some sort of middle ground between capitalism and socialism by showing that neither is perfect, while refusing to completely condemn them as failures. Vonnegut, more like Hemingway, embraces capitalism to show its effects and its power, both through the money tree and through his protagonist, Pilgrim, or, to be more accurate, through Pilgrim's experiences. Whether Pilgrim is an actual character or only a construct the narrator uses to make various points is another question, one that begs to be asked.

At one point, the narrator explains:

There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 8).

If the reader is to believe that the narrator keeps his promise to write a story with no beginning and no end, no real climaxes or important characterizations, one can understand Pilgrim's life story better. Indeed, the protagonist never really does anything, but events rather happen to him and around him. He becomes a clownish figure during the war because of the clothes he finds; he is abducted by aliens, he survives a plane crash, he even marries despite his own better judgment. As seen, all of this takes place with little or no control by Pilgrim. Like a marionette, the narrator forces him to endure and survive the backgrounds he gives him, coping in any way he can. Pilgrim is, in this way, a kind of an Everyman, because he lacks action, ideology or, indeed, the expected personal details usually seen in fiction.

The narrator does, however, give Pilgrim a coping mechanism in the form of Tralfamadorians and their philosophy on time and free will. The aliens view all of time at once, thus removing cause and effect, since in this view, there is no before or after, only now. While reinforcing the previously explained notion of avoiding the creation of causality in war, it also establishes the philosophy where free will does not exist. What is being criticized by this is again, probably, human nature, or beings, where they happen to die in wars started by "enormous forces." One of these forces is, of course, capitalism. Pilgrim's coat during his war imprisonment that looks like "a joke", which he received from the Germans as "an insult" only reinforces Vonnegut's view of the capitalist United States, since the photo-session serves to show how poorly dressed American Army is, "despite its reputation for being rich" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 3).

Going even further, Vonnegut expands his criticisms on the middle-class society. Pilgrim's son is described as a troubled man in his youth, smashing tombstones, who later comes to his senses and joins the Green Berets. The fact that the society is unable to fully comprehend the difference between violence toward inanimate objects and killing real people, disapproving of the former while praising the latter, shows the mindset of that society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vonnegut's society cannot distinguish reality from fiction, i.e. which history is actually history.

"Of course it happened," Trout told her. "If I wrote something that hadn't really happened, and I tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That's *fraud*" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 8).

Perhaps this is why the reader is able to see Vonnegut and Trout as, in a way, the same person – both misunderstood and lacking audience. Even though these criticisms are presented with a lot of black humor and irony, they still paint a bleak picture of the American society, not only with respect to their involvement in war and violence, but, more importantly, their inability to realize that they do, perhaps, possess free will and they are the ones capable of breaking the cycle of violence.

To go back to the notions of postmodern landscapes, Jarvis explains:

The disciplinary division between study of the body and the spaces through which it moves has become especially untenable within the late capitalist order. The body is one of the key locations on the postmodern landscape, a space subjected to colonisation, commodification and redevelopment like any other and therefore a suitable area for the consideration of the cultural geographer (Jarvis 1998: 9).

When it comes to human bodies, the reader of *Slaughterhouse-Five* can mostly recall the descriptions of the dead after the bombing of Dresden. The hundreds of "corpse mines" that at first "didn't smell bad" and that "were wax museums" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 10) again emphasize the author's idea that death should not be belittled and forgotten, but most of all never repeated. The bodies are presented as monuments, post-war memorials that serve as a warning to the world deaf and blind to the truth. Then, however, "the bodies rotted and liquefied" and the powerful "stink" was like beautiful "roses" and the chemical weapon, "mustard gas" (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 10). The bodies, therefore, mirror the wasteland of Dresden, emphasizing destruction and decay caused by wars; both are "products" of humanity. However, death and the dead are forgotten, and what is left is, perhaps, a Hollywood film of a great victory made popular by the Vietnam War.

Again trying to prevent this from happening, Vonnegut mentions Trout's *The Gutless Wonder*. In it, a robot with human-like appearance drops "burning jellied gasoline on human beings" and has bad breath. When the killing machine, who "had no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground" fixes his bad breath, he is popular again (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 8). Vonnegut creates a parallel between Trout's fiction and the events from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, establishing another story within a story – the



other being the one presented in the first chapter, of Pilgrim and the bombing of Dresden.

To fully comprehend the complexity of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, special attention has to be paid to the character of Pilgrim. As previously established, it is possible to observe him as an Everyman due to his failure to act and create his own belief system. On the other hand, the notion of a fully-developed character has to be entertained; if it is assumed that he is a character in the traditional sense of the term, then his deficiencies tell a tale of their own.

During World War II, Pilgrim is described as a "weakling," whose place in the war puzzles even the enemies. His constant whimpering in his sleep shows not only that he is weak physically but also mentally, which is why, after the war, he has a nervous breakdown and is committed to a psychiatric facility. While there, he meets Eliot Rosewater, a former infantry captain and another recurring character in Vonnegut's fiction. Rosewater is a fan of science fiction, especially of the works of Trout, and he is the one who introduces his works to Pilgrim. They read science fiction because it offers new perspectives and visions of the universe. This is a crucial moment in Pilgrim's life who is suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, since he is given a means by which he can rationalize his experiences in the war, and ultimately realize that death is not important, since everyone is alive in many other moments in time. Still being unable to cope with the harsh events in his past, his time travelling can be thus observed as an escape from reality. In addition, Pilgrim wishes to tell the world his Tralfamadorian experiences only after he receives a head injury in a plane crash. Because of all of this, it is possible to observe the time jumps as Pilgrim's attempt to face his own traumatic past. In fact, it is possible to doubt that he jumped in time before the plane crash because of another novel by Trout:

The name of the book was *The Big Board*. He got a few paragraphs into it, and then he realized that he *had* read it before – years ago, in the veterans' hospital. It was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra terrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212 (Vonnegut 2009: Chapter 9).

This establishes the possibility that Pilgrim imagined his alien experiences, where he is in a zoo with Montana Wildhack, and all the fractures of the narrative mirror his own fractured mind; even her name would suggest that Pilgrim's mind is "wildly hacked" by Trout's novels and their ideologies. If all the science fiction elements, therefore, exist only as Pilgrim's coping mechanisms, it becomes clear that there are no science fiction elements in the story. They only exist in Trout's novels. Since Vonnegut never fully explains whether Pilgrim is mentally unstable, one has to take into account that Pilgrim reads the novel after his experience with aliens. Bényei notices:

What happens is therefore not simply the intrusion of aliens into the fictional world but also the "coming true" of a science fiction novel through the person of Billy Pilgrim (Bloom 2009: 75).

What Bényei proposes further destabilizes the clarity of the novel's genre and reality. Science fiction usually requires suspension of disbelief by the reader; in this case, however, it is Vonnegut who points out the limitations of the genre by implying that his novel is, perhaps not a science fiction novel while he uses the elements that are "clichéd to the point of self-mocking" (Bloom 2009: 75). The novel, therefore, becomes a parody of the genre while its relationship with reality becomes even more complex than originally assumed.

Furthermore, the story within a story being so obviously self-reflexive both in the terms of genre and style (though not always on the same levels), with parallels between Vonnegut, the narrator and Trout, the reader can finally understand the true greatness and appeal of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Although the satirical nature of the novel is not necessarily humorous, the reader is provided with possible reasons for that in the thematic and psychoanalytical characteristics. The reader is thus required to dwell on the past in order to make any sense of the narrative.

American fiction since the 1960s has been described by Malcolm Bradbury [...] as being particularly obsessed with its own past—literary, social, and historical. Perhaps this preoccupation is (or was) tied in part to a need to find a particularly American voice within a culturally dominant Eurocentric tradition (Hutcheon 2004: 130).

Vonnegut manages to finally create that voice through his unique narration. While he deconstructs the established notions of traditional storytelling, he manages to find an "American voice" that is able to tell a story of the American society. Violence and capitalism demand new traditions, ones that are able to portray the brokenness of the United States contemporary to Vonnegut.

Postmodern elements of the novel, therefore, are a tool the writer uses to portray a new vision of history, one that would confront the beliefs of the present. In Vonnegut's view, while civilization progresses, the mindset of it stays the same, only finding new means of justifying its actions. As Hutcheon suggests, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not an ideological novel, but rather a novel that challenges ideologies through a new kind of narrative. Hence, metafiction and genre play, among others, do not stand only as postmodern elements, but rather exist to paint a new portrait of and for the American society.

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#### POSTMODERNI PEJZAŽI U *KLANICI PET*

##### Rezime

*Klanica pet* je vrlo složen postmoderni roman, koji, na površini, ima cilj da ispriča priču o bombardovanju Drezdena; međutim, ovaj roman treba posmatrati kao nešto mnogo više od običnog istorijskog romana. Tvrditi da je istorija i samim tim stvarnost, dok istovremeno govoriti da to nije u potpunosti tako jeste ono što Linda Hačion naziva istoriografskom metafikcijom. Prezentacija i ideja stvarnosti i metafikcije verovatno su najznačajniji pojmovi ovog romana. Rat je kaos, i naracija je haotična; Vonegat pravi paralele između Drugog svetskog rata i Vijetnamskog rata uz pomoć putovanja kroz vreme tako što skače iz jednog vremenskog okvira u drugi, iz jednog rata u drugi, čime stvara nelinearnu priču. Umesto da pokuša da odgonetne smisao haosa, Vonegat ga prihvata i njime oslikava izlomljenost sveta. Dok dekonstruiše ustaljene pojmove tradicionalnog pripovedanja, on uspeva da pronade „američki glas“, koji je sposoban da ispriča priču o američkom društvu.

*Ključne reči:* Klanica pet, postmodernizam, stvarnost, fikcija