

A Study of Earthly and Ethereal Oscillations in Happy Birthday Wanda June by Kurt Vonnegut

Aasma Iram¹
Hurriya Zahra²

¹National University of Modern Languages, Lahore – Pakistan

²Government Associate College for Women, Narowal – Pakistan

Abstract

Discourse analysis is a broad term for the study of the ways in which language is used by people, both in written texts and spoken contexts. It is "the study of real language use, by real speakers in real situations," wrote Teun A. van Dijk in the "Handbook of Discourse Analysis, Vol. 4 (2001)." This study expounds upon the "Discourse Analysis of earthly and ethereal oscillations in Happy Birthday Wanda June by Kurt Vonnegut." This study is significant because it explores how the exposition of temporal distortions in Vonnegut's play (1971) offers a panoramic view of life against the non-linear structure of the play. It also reveals why the impacts of socio-political and historic-religious figures on the fabrication of vice/virtue relationships among the human race are important to focus on in this research. It explores the ordeals that thwart the afterlife notions on the principle of poetic justice. The purpose of this study is to explore (I) the dichotomy between the playful life of Iscariot, Hitler, and other minor characters in heaven, and (II) the victimized existence of Penelope on earth due to the sudden resurrection of her husband (Harold Ryan) after eight years from the rain forests of Amazon. Discourse Analysis has been applied as a research tool. The conceptual framework of James Paul Gee's (1999) "six buildings tasks" (pg:104) has been used, which helped us to evaluate the language used by the author to build up his narrative. Basing on Gee's theory this study finds the absolute connectedness of the mortal characters bracketed by futile frustrations and the immortals waiting upon more menace to radically ravish them for their sports. This paper has further implications for future researchers to analyze other literary texts by Kurt Vonnegut to unveil various aspects of geospatial distinctions by applying post-modern theories.

Keywords: *Discourse analysis, Dichotomy, Manifestation, Post-modern theories, Temporal distortion*

Author's email: airam@numl.edu.pk

Introduction

Human existence problematizes the human journey of life and life after death in a swinging movement of earthly and ethereal manifestations. Man- the fallen man- lives temporarily on earth and ultimately routes back to the lost heavens. Vonnegut zooms in to let us peep into the human affairs in heaven as a continuation of zooming out of the violent world. Vonnegut projects the two levels of settings i.e., Earthly: Harold's house and Ethereal: the open streets of heaven without any suggestion of the gardens of Eden. The language of the dramatist targets the need, manifestation, and aftermaths of the fluctuating setting of the play from earth to ethereal and vice versa.

Significance

This study is significant for the exposition of temporal distortions Vonnegut (1971) offers against the non-linear structure of the play. The

impacts of socio-political and historic-religious figures on the fabrication of the vice/virtue relationship among the human race are the pivotal focus of this research. This study is significant to outright the traditional expectations of the human race towards the idea of poetic justice. The depiction of Paradise as a perpetuated place for suffering questions the concept of eternal bliss. The rouges, sinners, and criminals are equated to the innocent little kids in heaven to play shuffleboard.

Objectives

The aim of this study is:

- to evaluate the language used by the author to build his narrative and explain:
- the dichotomy between the playful life of Iscariot, Hitler, and other minor characters in heaven
- the victimized existence of Penelope on earth due to the sudden resurrection of her husband (Harold Ryan) after

eight years from the rainforests of the Amazon

Research Questions

The research carries the following questions:

- How does the language explore the dichotomy between the playful life of Iscariot, Hitler, and other minor characters in heaven?
- How does the victimized existence of Penelope on earth construct the idea of resurrection and ethereal life through narration?

Literature Review

The play *Happy Birthday Wanda June* is a multi-dimensional drama. Different critics have analyzed it through various types of lenses. The New York Times Reviews this play in “Toxic Masculinity, Vonnegut Style, in Happy Birthday Wanda June” in these words: (Paul’s) image of his father is larger than life, woven from the mythology of the hunt and the romance of war: so much killing such a paragon of manhood”. Laura Collins further adds that the cult of masculinity that Vonnegut lampooned

is still with us, absurd and menacing and terribly, terribly vain.

Josh Simpson in his research “Kurt Vonnegut, Modernity, and the Self: A Guide to the Good Life” opines: “The problem for Vonnegut and his characters is that modern world, that is, a world of global war, genocide, industrialization, ever expanding technology, environmental destruction, and atomic annihilation is not inherently conducive to human life”.

Aydin Gormez and Zehra Ekiner in their research, compare the male characters of Kurt Vonnegut and Ernest Hemingway in an apt manner. They comment: “...the attention is drawn to Vonnegut’s parodying Odysseus’ homecoming after some twenty years and Hemingway’s portrayal of war heroes who could kill many people pitilessly and have macho attitudes towards women”. There are deep streaks of intertextuality between the literary works of Vonnegut and Hemingway.

Methodology

This research study is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The researcher has used the technique of Discourse Analysis in the light of Gee's (1999) 'six-building tasks' (pg.: 104) which highlight the meaning in association with the signs used by the writer, the use of actions to convey meaning, the construction of different situations to present a particular idea and to create social identities and power relations. The text of the play *Happy Birthday Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut has been analyzed to find out the earthly and ethereal oscillations by applying the technique of Discourse Analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of Gee's (1999) "six buildings tasks" (pg:104) is used, to evaluate the language used by the author to build up his narrative, i.e.;

- **Semiotic building**, that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings

about what semiotic (communicative) systems, systems of knowledge, and ways of knowing, are here and now relevant and activated.

- **World building**, that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what is here and now (taken as) "reality," what is here and now (taken as) present and absent, concrete and abstract, "real" and "unreal," probable, possible, and impossible.
- **Activity building**, that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what activity or activities are going on, is composed of what specific actions.
- **Socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building**, that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what

identities and relationships are relevant to the interaction, with their concomitant attitudes, values, ways of feeling, ways of knowing and believing, as well as ways of acting and interacting.

- **Political building**, that is, using cues or clues to construct the nature and relevance of various “social goods,” such as status and power, and anything else taken as a “social good” here and now (e.g., beauty, humor, verbalness, specialist knowledge, a fancy car, etc.).
- **Connection building**, that is, using cues or clues to make assumptions about
 - how the past and future of interaction, verbally and non-verbally, are
 - connected to the present moment and each other – after all, interactions

- always have some degree of continuous coherence.

Sample

The sample for this study is Kurt Vonnegut’s play *Happy Birthday Wanda June*. The text of the play is taken as a sample and the technique of Discourse Analysis has been applied for finding the earthly and ethereal oscillations in the play.

Results and Discussion

Content Analysis

Vonnegut opens the play with a non-traditional style to allow the main female character to call the other characters onto the stage for their own introduction to avoid the charge of being an unreliable narrator.

Earthly inhabitants include **Penelope** who was a symbol of marital fidelity in *Odyssey* but here is betrothed with the two suitors after eight years’ absence of her husband. **Mr. Shuttle** is an earthly symbol of modern consumerism trying to win Penelope’s hand as a realization of

the American dream. **Dr. Woodly** is an earthly metaphor for spiritual healing and an advocate for peace all the time. His fondness for violin reveals his aesthetic bent of mind. **Harold Ryan** is a symbol of brutality and materialism who prefers the quest for diamonds in the jungles of Africa over his familial relations. The portrayal of **Col. Loose leaf** as an atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki symbolizes the callousness of man at the beck and call of the high authorities. This eponymous play deals with Wanda June as an innocent little girl who died in a road accident by an ice cream truck. **Konigswald** the beast of Yugoslavia serves as a statistical competitor of Harold in killing more human beings than any other killer. **Mildred** a voluptuous lady denotes the moral deterioration regarding extramarital relations and is responsible for reporting to the readers about **Hitler** and others happily living in heaven.

The eight years lost Harold visits home and finds Penelope gone for a date with Mr. Shuttle to watch wrestling. Harold further gets disillusioned that his wife is going to be engaged to Dr. Woodly who wants to take Penelope “to an emergency ward sometime—on a Saturday night, that is also fun (4)” The parameters of fun for the earthly creatures are reduced to the visitation of the hospitals. The ultimate pleasure for Dr. Woodly is to serve the sick humanity instead of jubilating with his wouldbe wife into some ice cream parlor or some cinema house. In addition to that, the victimized existence of Penelope has been satirically labeled as an infidel to indicate the thwarted identity of the female gender on post-modern earth. Though there is no worldly connection between the husband and wife still she is called Penelope Ryan which shows her sense of belonging to show her more like her misery. In the words of Penelope “This is a

tragedy. When it's done, my face will be as white as the snows of Kilimanjaro" (6).

The human greed to collect diamonds led Harold and Looseleaf to spend eight years in the jungles of the Amazon. The priority to accumulate wealth over familiar relations is what the earth is proffering for in post-World War II. Mr. Shuttle proves himself as the second generation in the shoes of Harold and Looseleaf. Vonnegut shapes the house of Mr. Harold on the mode of a jungle by projecting the doorbells as the laughs of hyenas, and roars of lions. These were the actual recordings of animal cries, often complementing the situation when rung, sniggering upon the despondent condition of the inhabitants of that house.

Penelope nostalgically embarks upon the idea that "My husband, who kills so much, has been missing for eight years. He disappeared in a light plane over the Amazon Rain Forest, where he hoped to find diamonds as big as cantaloupes. His pilot was Colonel

Looseleaf Harper, who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki". (Hyena laughs). (7) Her frustrated memories of unhappy married life suffered her to fall into an identity complex.

Frustrated sexuality gulfs the early post-war time from the late post-war time. This stigma is revealed through the words of Looseleaf with Ryan "Something very important about sex must have happened while we were gone" (24). This statement contextualizes the rapid increase of nudity in the magazine that Looseleaf comes across after eight years of return from Amazon jungles to an American State. Kurt suggests that modern man cannot have sexual gratification sprouting from love and care but rather from visual pornographic images available in print media. Penelope adds to this notion of frustrated sexuality by uttering "There is no one in here of any earthly use to anyone..." (46). Penelope's remark about Ryan that he's a ghost shows that a sense of companionship was missing in her. During eight years of absence, on one

hand, Penelope believed her husband dead and consequently felt unleashed from the bond of marital enchainment while on the other hand, Paul is a constant reminder of her dual sexual positionality when he asserts “You're married! You've already got a husband”. Penelope was not ordained by the emotion of love but the brutality of Harold exploited her. “Most men shunned me even when I nearly swooned for want of love. I might as well have been girdled in a chastity belt. My chastity belt was not made of iron and chains and chicken wire, but of Harold's lethal reputation” (6). She had a suffocating sense of marriage after the sudden disappearance of her husband.

The domestic power hierarchy was reshaped over the eight years. The submissive, toyed wife of Harold gets the Master's degree in English Literature and redefines her role as a wife above sexuality and domesticity by following the modern vogue of feminism. Her imaginative powers

were polished and she started to perceive the world aesthetically instead of mourning over her wife cum widow status during Harold's absence.

Vonnegut bifurcates the earthly level of human existence into two further categories in the play. He depicts the human inclination towards peace and war through the dialogues of different characters. Dr.Woodly describes the value of intellectual power over physical energies when he tries to convince Paul to exhibit good morality instead of developing good musculature. Woodly's suggestion “Their magic was in their muscles. Your magic is in your brain” (10) reflects the human aspiration to make the earth a place full of peace and intellectual prosperity. This dialogue draws a comparison between the physical and intellectual powers of human beings. He takes physical strength as violence against the people of the past. Whereas, the brain i.e., intellect is the talk of the present

times that he demands from the present generation. Woodly further directs Penelope “Wear a coat of domestic mink. For the love of God,...don’t lightheartedly advertise that the last jaguars died for you”(10). In contrast to such peace lovers, the other group of worldly inhabitants is prone to destruction by competing for the statistical number of people they killed. Kingsway is only one example of it.

Vonnegut sustains the parallel by portraying the two levels of the Heavenly world. On the first Ethereal domain, the little innocent Wanda June is placed into the traditional face of heaven i.e. victimized by a road accident at the hands of an ice-cream truck driver. Wanda June is singular to support such type of innocent people residing in heaven. On the second Ethereal level, the cruelest and cunning people are eternalized such as Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, and Hitler, the German dictator along with multiple other criminals and sinners. Vonnegut sabotaged the thin threshold of vice and virtue by

mingling the earth and heaven into a continuation of worldly affairs.

Vonnegut’s depiction of Hitler in heaven playing shuffleboard thwarts the worldly parameters of vice and virtue as called poetic justice. Germans’ collective guilty consciousness still laments the human mutilation during wartime but Vonnegut places Hitler in paradise to portray heaven as a piece of cake to attain. The dramatist projects the ethereal world as a perpetuated setting of worldly drama without any suggestion of poetic justice. Mildred, the mother-in-law of Looseleaf, appears as the most voluptuous lady in the play. She is also in heaven. It is through her eyes that Vonnegut presents the parade of the Nazi party in paradise. Mildred articulates: “You know what happens in Heaven today? There was a tornado. I’m not kidding you. There was a Goddamn tornado. Torn up Fifty-six houses. Nobody got killed. Nobody ever gets killed” (68). She reinforces the idea of continuity of sufferings in the above world. Apart from the sufferings of the

victimized, the hegemonic practices of the high powers are also perpetuated in the play. Furthermore, their savagery of Harold is belittled by The Beast of Yugoslavia when he bombarded the words: "Harold said he killed maybe two hundred guys. I killed a hundred times that many, I bet" (36). The Beast of Yugoslavia is a resident of paradise but is still in competition with the worldly resident Ryan to stand above all in his savagery. Vonnegut makes it interesting that the worldly sense of rivalry lasts long enough to reach the ethereal world.

Happy Birthday Wanda
Junedocumentizes that "The sound of the Nazi rally come up slowly Sieg Heil Sieg heil ...in full ceremonial uniform (35). It revealed that the post-war generation did not attempt any legislation against the dark chapter of human history where the human race was butchered in the name of race and religion. Vonnegut's satire really becomes

poignant when he referred to the post-modern man as prone to petty legislation to stop "magazines show(ing) tits today...Used to be against the law...must have changed this law" (21). The legislation for human welfare is not the cup of tea of the political powers who were just engaged in bringing amendments to the aesthetic laws. The trodden downs on earth stay smashed in Ariel's world as well.

Dr.Woodly carried a PEACE poster and was bullied by the savage Harold. Harold thought of Woodly as his rival teases in every possible way. The suitors' triangle. e. Ryan, Shuttle, and Woodly, to win the hand of Penelope provokes Harold to thrush apart Woodly's source of pleasure, the violin, to bring an end to his aesthetic self. Ryan decided to bereave all of their pleasure whosoever attempts to snatch his Penelope, whom he considers the source of pleasure from himself only. Ryan not only smashed the violin of

Woodley who serves humanity but also threatened him to take away his life. It is juxtaposed to the human deprivations one undergoes while attempting to bring positivity to the world.

Vonnegut philosophized the need of developing love and peace in this world. Because it was all that was prevalent on this earth and would continue to appear in the ethereal world. He asserts that “Chinese maniacs and Russian maniacs and American maniacs and French maniacs and British maniacs have turned this lovely, moist, nourishing blue-green ball into a doomsday device. Let a radar set and a computer mistake a hawk or a meteor for a missile, and that's the end of mankind”. Vonnegut’s stern comment upon modern technology and the concept of political hegemony invites the human race to sow peace on Earth to reap it in the Ethereal world.

Conclusions

The study highlighted the earthly and ethereal oscillations in the play

under the light of Gee’s (1999) ‘six building tasks. While applying the discourse analysis as a technique, the researcher found that the so-called earthly sophistication had been paralleled to the nasty continuation of earthly disasters and deprivations through the readers’ transportation in these two spheres.

Based on Gee’s (1999), theory this study found the absolute connectedness of the mortal characters bracketed by futile frustrations and the immortals waiting upon more menace to radically ravish them for their sports. Penelope’s narration of time and the time of events depict the situational cues of now and then portraying ‘reality’.

Harold’s pantomimes aid the connection building in the story. Penelope’s use of repetition served to unveil her vulnerable condition as a parallel to human resurrection in the life hereafter. The oscillation between assertive and surrendering dialogues manifests the power positionality of the characters from hegemonic to pathetic existence.

The play *Happy Birthday Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut highlights the human suffering and pains in both worlds, the writer established the fact that the modern man needs to maintain peace in this world in order to get relief in the heavens, the presence of Hitler and other callous figures in heaven shows that man was suffering even after the materialistic shutter of the world is down for him. The world needed peace and love to end the sufferings of its residents, people like Woody and Penelope needed to end the miseries and pains of humanity with their continuous dedication and facilitating nature.

Recommendations

This research is open to future researchers and the text of the play can be further analyzed in the light of Post-Modern theories. Critical Discourse Analysis of the play can also be done for finding out the hidden agenda and ideology of the writer for writing this play and recreating figures like Hitler and

Konigswald in the play while placing them in Heavens with the same power and authority.

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