Corrin Fosmire

ENGL 300

Dr. Timothy Morton

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A Structural Analysis of Vonnegut’s *Slapstick*

Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slapstick* begins at the end of Western civilization. The first page is filled with ekphrastic description, allowing the scene to be drawn up while time passes extremely slowly, if at all:

It is springtime. It is late afternoon.

Smoke from a cooking fire on the terrazzo floor of the lobby of the Empire State Building on the Island of Death floats out over the ailanthus jungle which Thirty-Fourth Street has become.

The pavement on the floor of the jungle is all crinkum-crankum-heaved this way and that by frost-heaves and roots.

There is a small clearing in the jungle. A blue-eyed, lantern-jawed old white man, who is two meters tall and one hundred years old, sits in the clearing on what was once the back seat of a taxicab.

I am that man.

My name is Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain. (Vonnegut 23)

While the narrator declares it to be “late afternoon”, there is no reason to believe that this state has changed during the description of the scene. That time passes at all is evident from one of only two active verbs in the entire paragraph sequence, namely “floats”, referring to the smoke from the fire. The use of the leisurely “floats” as opposed to a more active verb, such as “billows”, points to a nearly static scene. The second active verb is “sits”, which augments this perception. The duration of this exact moment in time, where the narrator is cooking over the fire, must be negligible. However, the duration of this moment in the narrative is much longer, as the description drags on. Therefore, the ratio of narrative duration to chronological duration is very high, typical of the aperture phase of a narrative. Also typical of the aperture phase is the use of hallucinatory language. Vonnegut employs an abundance of demonstrative pronouns, as in “the terrazzo floor”, “the ailanthus jungle”, “the back seat”. The demonstrative pronouns implicitly point to something the reader thinks he or she should already know, which the reader must conjure into existence, or hallucinate. These phrases sharply differ with seemingly similar phrases such as “a terrazzo floor”, which are non-specific so the text does not demand the reader imagine a specific instance. The use of slightly unusual descriptions, such as “lantern-jawed”, “crinkum-crankum-heaved”, and “ailanthus jungle” contribute to the hallucination. These descriptions force the reader to imagine what on Earth it means to be “lantern-jawed”, for instance, contributing to their immersion into the narrative.

*Slapstick* begins not only at the end of Western civilization, but chronologically very near the end of the narrative as well. In the first chapter, the one hundred year old Wilbur Swain describes post-apocalyptic Manhattan, while in the second, Wilbur narrates his early childhood, nearly a century before, in the United States before its dissolution. This extreme difference between plot and story leads to interesting consequences. As the plot advances, the specter of post-apocalyptic New York casts a fatalistic shade upon the idealistic promises of Dr. Swain. For example, in between describing a massive project to eliminate loneliness in the United States by producing artificial extended families (Vonnegut 180) and professing his belief that “the simple experience of companionship is going to allow them to climb the evolutionary ladder in the in a matter of hours or days, or weeks at most” (Vonnegut 202), the story switches settings back to the initial scene, reminding the reader that this plan will not in fact allow the castaways of American society to “climb the evolutionary ladder.” This contrast between story and plot produces an ambiguity in the experience of the central social plan of Dr. Swain, namely to give each person ten thousand brothers and sisters as well as 190 thousand cousins to rely on. First, there are the fatalistic reminders that Western civilization has been destroyed, which produce a feeling of futility, that these promises cannot work as intended. It is not, however, the case that this project leads to the apocalypse, which is actually due to a “plague” caused by inhaling miniaturized Chinese people, which kills nearly the entire population of the United States. In fact, Dr. Swain refers to his plan positively, as he realizes while attending a meeting of his synthetic family “that nations could never acknowledge their own wars as tragedies, but that families not only could but had to” (Vonnegut 244). He then calls his plan one of the four greatest inventions ever produced by Americans, alongside *Robert’s Rules of Order,* “The Bill of Rights, [and] the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Vonnegut 246). The clash of the experience of futility with the experience of a more peaceful, more caring prospect for society is never fully resolved.

Two more ambiguities arise in the use of the phrase “time flew,” repeated in the narrative as Dr. Swain becomes addicted to narcotics. Its first use occurs as years upon years pass instantaneously:

And time flew. Time was a blurry bird now—made indistinct by ever-increasing dosages of tri-benzo-Deportamil.

Somewhere in there, I closed my hospital, gave up medicine entirely, and was elected United States Senator from Vermont.

And time flew. (Vonnegut 181)

Here, the ratio between narrative duration and chronological duration is incredibly small. Within one sentence, monumental life decisions and arduous political campaigns are reduced to mere subordinate clauses. The phrase reappears in the epilogue (Vonnegut 270), where it is used again to speed up narrative time relative to chronological time. However, there is an ambiguity here as the first sentence of the epilogue is “Dr. Swain died before he could write any more” (Vonnegut 259). The use of “time  
 flew” again suggests that either that the narrator of the epilogue is under the influence of some similar time-influencing drug, or that it was not entirely due to narcotics that Dr. Swain begins to experience time extremely quickly. The question of the narrator produces the second ambiguity of time flying, which occurs as the narrative melds two narrative threads that are characterized by vastly different relationships to time. In the post-apocalyptic world, in the space of sixty pages Dr. Swain moves from “two days away” (Vonnegut 193) from his birthday to the day after, as he complains of a headache from “my birthday party last night” (Vonnegut 258). As mentioned earlier, time is moving extremely quickly in the other narrative, as the possibly narcotic-induced time perception of Dr. Swain speeds along without pause. These two time-flows merge briefly as Dr. Swain watches Isadore sweeping the lobby, then “remembers” (Vonnegut 154) an anecdote and dives back into the extremely rapid time-flow of the past narrative. The use of “remembers” specifically does not resolve which narrative thread this is part of, as the remembering occurs as Dr. Swain in the slower time-flow, but the event itself is part of the quicker time-flow.

The apocalyptic event of the Green Death, caused by inhaling “trillions” of miniaturized Chinese men and women (Vonnegut 234), occurs with a notably high narrative frequency but an almost bizarrely small narrative duration. Dr. Swain references The Green Death event from the first few pages, as he declares his relatives believe “the most glorious accomplishment of the people who inhabited this island so teemingly was to die” (26), using “accomplishment” to denote a completed action. As far as the narrative is concerned, though, this event is far from complete, as Dr. Swain references “the Green Death” three more times: once as the “depopulation” (Vonnegut 50), then as “the end of the Nation” (Vonnegut 25), before mentioning how he survived with a serendipitous antidote (Vonnegut 233). Yet, while the narrative frequency of the event is high, which would seem to imply it is extremely important, the narrative duration of the event itself is non-existent. The entire Green Death event occupies scarcely more than two sentences. First, the narrator declares that “people began to die by the millions … of ‘The Green Death’” (Vonnegut 213), The narrator then finishes off the retelling of the event matter-of-factly, relating that “And that was the end of the Nation. It became families, and nothing more. Hi ho” (Vonnegut 213). At this point, the apocalyptic event, causing the death of millions upon millions, has been neatly wrapped out and finished with. There is a strong ambiguity here as to the actual importance of this event to the narrative, as the narrator references it over and over yet effectively dismisses it without any particular interest.

The ending of *Slapstick* does not feel like an ending, and there is even an question as to whether the epilogue or the final chapter is the true conclusion. While usually an ending implies an accord between frequency and duration, what the epilogue terms the “climax,” (Vonnegut 259) namely the sale of the land comprising the Louisiana Purchase, maintains a strangely detached tone with a large difference in narrative time versus chronological time. For example, the narrator describes that “we chatted some about his grandfather. Then, Captain O’Hare and I took off for Urbana, Illinois, and an electronic reunion with my sister, who had been dead so long” (Vonnegut 258). Even this “climax” does not really feel like it is important enough to be an ending, when it is described in such terse language. Indeed, the narrator of the epilogue, after briefly touching on the death of Dr. Swain, admits that there were multiple “loose ends of the yarns he had spun” (Vonnegut 259). The epilogue narrator continues to describe events in a manner that seems almost identical in tone to Dr. Swain’s narration, down to the “hi ho” tic and the use of “And time flew” (Vonnegut 261; 270). However, the epilogue’s ending is itself no more fulfilling as an ending. The last two sentences of *Slapstick* are “Another would row her across the Harlem River to the Island of Death, at the risk of his own life. And so on” (Vonnegut 274). The difference between narrative time and chronological time is fully maintained, as is the detachment (“And so on”). This lack of any fulfilling ending devalues the conclusion and any possible morals that might have been found there, suggesting that the truly important thoughts and ideas occur in the middle of the text, possibly in the idea of synthetic extended families to fight loneliness.

Works Cited

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slapstick, or, Lonesome No More!* Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2010.