

Postmodernist Fusion of Historical Facts and Fictional Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *Hocus Pocus*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore Kurt Vonnegut's preoccupation with the fantastical takeover of America by International conglomerates in his novel, *Hocus Pocus*. Vonnegut's use of a futuristic perspective and many kinds of scientific discoveries and inventions are examined. The paper elaborates Vonnegut's postmodernist intermingling of historical facts and fictional reality and flair for historical revisionism. Vonnegut's apocalyptic motifs of strange learning disabilities and disorders and his use of music to transcending the realm of the ordinary receive special attention.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, *Hocus Pocus*, Postmodern, Reality, Disabilities, Disorders

Kurt Vonnegut occupies a prominent place in American literature. His concerns about technology, the future and myth arise out of the events of his life. His life, his influences, and personal experiences find expression in art. His fiction of the sixties is a fair example of American cultural change. His materials are science, philosophy and anthropology but their form is one that arises out of bourgeoisie life. In an age of complexity and obscurity both of narrative form and vision, Vonnegut appears doggedly middle class, conforming to his simple disposition towards plain truth even in the face of the most challenging atrocities.

As a postmodernist, Vonnegut's techniques partake of playful artifice which foreground the process of writing and reading novels and also unsettle given notions of life, time and death. If there is a way of dealing with pain and despair in his writing it is through the anti- intellectual subversion of cause and effect and a reinvention of form. Writing within the conditions of his time, Vonnegut touches on all its felt urgencies, art and the artist, society and politics, wars and massacres, weapons and armaments, diseases and aberrations, freedom and confinement, pornography and ethics. His oeuvre is best defined by his deft fusion of form and content. As a novelist he is grounded in contemporary issues of man and his society. His distinction however rests in his ability to apply postmodernist cerebrations to produce new and unusual insights. His narrative artistry has to be assessed in the light of his contemporary novelists.

The novel, *Hocus Pocus* (1990), derives its force from the stark and revealing display of America's destruction of itself and its ultimate takeover by conglomerates like the Japanese. As in

his other novels, here too the Vonnegutian eloquence emerges from the narrator's inability to deal with the happenstance. Eugene Debs Hartke, the protagonist in a bid to unravel the "hocus-pocus" in which he is caught reveals the cruelty, self-centredness and hypocrisy of his fellow Americans in the '90s and at the same time expresses his inability to alter any part of it. A typical Vonnegut reader will attempt to decode the title *Hocus Pocus* but will soon realise that it refers to the mess that the protagonist and the reader find themselves in beyond their own making. In other words, an ordinary decent citizen cannot expect to live in any other way except ensconced in a "hocuspocus."

One of the major contributors to this unjustifiable scheme of things is a penchant for wars and subsequent takeovers. The war Hartke has been victimized by and where he too victimizes people is the Vietnam War. One part of his life is tainted by the crimes he was forced to commit as a part of being a professional soldier. A second major deterrent to Hartke's progress has been his unfortunate family life. As a teenager Hartke is forced into joining West Point whereas his own interest lays in music especially Jazz music on the piano. Hartke's entry into the military academy is an avenue to elevate his parent's social position. His misfortune complicates itself when he marries women with a family history of insanity. These experience in his life give him the needed fortitude when he is accused of professional misconduct and misleading his learning-disabled students. Perhaps it is his troubled past too, which helps keep him unfazed even in the face of arrest and torture.

Hocus Pocus starts with an "Editors Note" which highlights many of the eccentricities and obsessions of the narrator. Vonnegut's own hocus-pocus comes to light in the manner in which every little authorial detail is mentioned. A discussion of the novel therefore merits an insight into this "Note." A significant part of the novel deals with discoveries, inventions and strange diseases notably dyslexia. It would be unfair to miss out on history and Vonnegut's use of it in the novel as the reader has no clue whether it is history as such or a fictionalized version of it that is being passed on as history. History in a postmodernist novel flouts the notion of a verifiable, established and known past. Revisionist historical fiction contests the concept of a knowable past and posits instead an array of incidents, and characters isolated from their familiar contexts and placed instead in settings that generate shock, surprise and disorientation.

As a part of the postmodernist novelist's repertoire of devices, history serves more than one purpose for analysing life in general and character in particular. The historical past of the Mohiga Valley and the Tarkington institute for the learning disabled is more an attempt at analysing the contemporary situation. If in the distant past Mohiga Valley was the place where some important inventions took place, in the present it is the centre for criminals, the Athena jail which is notoriously popular. We recognize a certain nostalgia for the past in a statement like: "In more optimistic times, when it was not widely understood that human beings were killing the planet with the by-products of their ingenuity..." (9). Hartke begins his account of his past by underlining his association with Eugene Debs, the noted socialist, pacifist and labour organizer who ran several times for the presidency of United States of America, after whom he has been named. An association with the legendary Debs is used by Hartke to narrate his own career as a professional soldier, which was the very antithesis of the life of his socialist namesake. Hartke thus appears as a revised version of his legendary namesake reversing his socialist ideals and posing instead an absurd and blatantly indefensible version of his lofty ideals.

Hartke's narrative of Vietnam War foregrounds the destruction of the physical and the psychological self but also appears as an analogue for man's destructive nature in general and cruelty as a distinctive human trait. It is not as if previous wars have not been destructive and there are accounts from the Second World War and the battle of Gettysburg to illustrate the history of war. Jeffery Walsh categorises Vietnam War as different because of its defeat both militarily and politically for Americans. In counter-cultural terms such a national dilemma was dramatized in metaphors suggestive of irreconcilable and inherent moral contradiction.

Vonnegut employs historical revisionism not only to present his own constructed account of Vietnam War but also to comment on the potential for destructive evil in contemporary human nature. Hartke's own past is inextricably linked to the dubious past of the Vietnam War and it is documentary evidence from his own narrative perambulations that makes us aware of the un-heroic nature of this war. Hartke's defence of the American Consulate in Saigon and his senseless killing of civilians to win the much-coveted Silver Star are all an attempt to expose the ridiculousness of war in general.

If in *Slaughterhouse - Five*, John Wayne is condemned as a trivializer of wars and wartime activities, *Hocus Pocus* is a unmasking of the elaborate facade of the Vietnam War. Hartke is a Vietnam War veteran and therefore retains some memories from his bizarre and gruesome past. His anecdotes are therefore lived experiences. It is the deliberate attempt at projecting a false and heroic version of the Vietnam War that makes the board of Trustees of Tarkington College preventers of history. Hartke in keeping with his 'friend and historian Damon Stern's views appraises the students of the historically and politically true nature of certain important landmarks in history. It is repeating these facts that lands Hartke into trouble and he is accused of disparaging virtues like patriotism and leadership. It is in a context like this that Vonnegut raises the question of what really a historical account is, and whether as partakers of history we really understand the different versions of history, private, idiosyncratic and anachronistic that is being propagated in a revisionist historical fiction like *Hocus Pocus*.

As a novelist, Vonnegut seems to revel in flouting plausible historical repertoire and instead presenting an amusing invented version of it. Part of his historical or quasi - historical bandwagon is the use of characters from his own earlier novels. One such character in *Hocus Pocus* is Paul Siazinger, the writer in resident for that year in Tarkington college. Paul Siazinger is of course, a friend and housemate of Rabo Karabekian, the ex-abstract expressionist painter in *Bluebeard*. Also of interest is Hartke's mention of the Galapagos islands with reference to a televised debate on T.V. about environmentalism. History, then in Hartke's terms seems to be some kinds of recyclable hocus pocus and it is only through the transfiguring power of historical revisionism that the planet can be deemed habitable anymore. Hartke is a science graduate, but his outlook on the American takeover by multinational conglomerates is that of an anthropologist's. America is doomed because of its "uncaring" ruling class but also because of the "opportunistic" and "grabbing" tendencies of the foreign groups who are in no way less devious than alien invaders. There is a profusion of takeovers of social institutions, of educational institutions and of building and electrical corporations. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale considers the takeover of countries by conglomerates, a significant science fiction motif of postmodernist fiction.

The world of *Hocus Pocus* derives its special appeal from the strange contraptions that populate the novel. If one of the earlier inventions in the novel is the building up of a perpetual motion machine which is supposed to defy the law of inertia, the later invention is a computer game called “Groit” which is “the most popular computer game at the Pahlavi Pavilion” (102). Groit with its predictive powers of a person’s future prospects, once it is fed with the age, race, degree of education, present situation, drug abuse etc is symbolic of the omniscience of technological machinery, especially computers.

Hartke himself has been attracted to the computer and as can be assumed, feeds detail from his own past life to see if the computer’s predictions are accurate. Each time the computer with its clockwork calculations predicts the life of an alcoholic, a wife beater and a premature death for him. Being a computer, it has no way of taking into account those subtle variations in human development which are unique to each individual.

Vonnegut seemingly uses genetically controlled disorders as a way of telescoping the attention of these offenders to their own misadventures. In *Hocus Pocus* then, Vonnegut’s favourite theme of how man can survive against himself assumes the force of an apocalyptic announcement which foreshadows the doom of our planet and all habitable life forms. Furthermore, it declares the “irreversible” nature of this tide. Dyslexia and plutocratic juvenile incapacity might then be just a few of the aberrations indicative of human mutability and the catalytic effect of man-made ecological imbalance in propagating these disorders. There might be many more disastrous consequences to follow.

Hartke is just one sample American astride on the roller coaster ride to doom, surrounded by all kinds of diseases like obesity, insanity, Gonorrhoea and finally Tuberculosis. It is the lament of millions of hidden Hartkes that unsettles Vonnegut. In his later phase of literary career, Vonnegut uses postmodernist strategies of alternate exposition of time. In *Hocus Pocus*, he makes use of revisionist and apocryphal history. The divergent use of time and history along with the extrapolation into space are all devices that reinforce the pattern of contingency and randomness in the Vonnegut cosmos. Through these and other devices, Vonnegut underlines the force of uncompromising and inevitable fate. These devices also help Vonnegut dwell on the seriousness of issues like the growing human dependence on machines, the undermining of human creativity through advancement in technology and the problem of surviving in an asocial environment. Also evident in these later novels is Vonnegut’s attempt at refraining from a definite closure. The protagonists of all his later novels attempt to integrate themselves in the face of an all pervasive pain, despair and failure. The autobiographical accounts of these characters are the only therapeutic remedy that helps them overcome their languor.

Vonnegut is a persistent postmodernist artificer with a vision of a better existence for his fellow human beings despite his protests against explanations. He has always attempted to foreground sophomoric questions like the purpose of human life and how we are to derive meaning from our existence. His later novels are continued attempts at answering these questions. He has been openly didactic on issues like the cruelty of the Darwinian logic of survival of the ‘fittest, the

human inability to relate to complicated technological environment, the increasing human attraction to wars, atrocities and weaponry, insatiable human propensity for power and material gain and a disavowal of any human commitment to protecting the natural environment. He also comments on the role of the novelist in society. In his use of lucid postmodernist narrative artifice for structuring these questions, Vonnegut surprisingly displays a greater proclivity for the moral rather than the aesthetic.

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