

A POSTMODERN READING OF TIME, ART AND (IM)MORTALITY WITH REFERENCE TO KURT VONNEGUT'S SHORT STORY "2BR02B"

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Abstract : Kurt Vonnegut is an American author, who imbued his works with satire, gallows humour and science fiction; the last of which holds pre-eminence in the current research paper. A philosophical rejection of grand narratives and central ideas in "2BR02B" echoes the structuring of the narrative along the lines of postmodernist thought. Additionally, multiple voices work in tandem to dispel indoctrination of singular notion(s). A postmodern assessment of the short story is expected to result in understanding the interplay of elements of time, art and (im)mortality in Vonnegut's prose piece.

IndexTerms- modernism, postmodernism, birth, death.

I. INTRODUCTION

The very name "2BR02B" has a literary resonance to it paving way for Shakespeare's infamous line from Hamlet "To be or not to be" (Act III Scene I). Upon probe into the text, one is expected to arrive at the significance of the alteration to which the familiar phrase has been subjected. Moreover, it incorporates the basic tenets of postmodernism by the way of manipulation of set patterns to perception as the title undergoes modern transfiguration to suit the present day and age; with a scientific mutation.

II. FULL TEXT

The text is initiated in reminiscence of earlier times as the golden past, wherein peace reigned, poverty was non-existent and wars weren't fought. But, a close reading draws attention to certain problematic queries unaddressed in a bid to create a fantastical past forgetful of the fact that the present eventually becomes the past. The aforementioned queries subsume covert economic disparities, existence and perpetration of crime owing to the definition of the term at the time and actions deemed inclusive and covert conflicts or differences in opinion decisive of each era.

In the text, death is held in close affinity to an adventure in terms of people's attempts at indulging in it through choice, and not compulsion making death appealing; owing to the fact that old age could be prevented by humans, therefore negating the centrality previously accorded to or endowed in God's hands as the governor of life and death. The population of United States is maintained in check by manual intervention, thereby restricting fertility; an idea designed by Dr. Hitz, the Chief Obstetrician, in the present text under perusal. An extension of the same doctrine is imbibed by a character in author Dan Brown's novel "Inferno", Bertrand Zobrist, a geneticist dedicated to the cause of Earth's population control; taking an extremist stance in creating a dystopian world order by releasing a place assisting and accelerating genetic modification affecting sterility in one in third of Earth's population.

Edward K. Wehling, the fifty-six year old expectant father, is deemed young when held in juxtaposition to other humans with an average lifespan of one hundred and twenty nine years. His looks are judged and affirmed by him and others, in a manner similar to that of the invisible man; overtly giving voice to his physical manifestation while covertly, placing him in a hierarchical

constituency wherein he lacks basic human rights, majorly the freedom to pursue “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”(Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities)

The short story in question is a fusion of art and ‘fiction writing’ in terms of a painter creating a mural art within the hospital. The picture is suited to perfection and yet the creator/painter remains dissatisfied and sceptical of his work in progress, wherein the painting could, figuratively, represent modernism with its belief in the “ideal and utopian vision of human life and society and belief in progress” and the painter as a postmodernist individual, an embodiment of the term postmodernism that voices life with imperfections as the happy one, challenging “established structures and belief systems that took place in western society from 1960s onwards.” (Postmodernism) It is a fitting image, owing to the fact that the text was originally published in January 1962 and thus is context based. The painting carries the ironic name ‘The Happy Garden of Life’, as none of the common folk is included in the picture except those privileged and deemed worthy of immortalizing. It is held as a fantastical mirror of life with no resemblance to reality.

In addition to structures sustaining life, also exists a Federal Bureau of Termination with representatives donning clothes made of the colour purple. According to Jennifer Bourn, “the colour purple is often associated with royalty, nobility, luxury, power and ambition. Also, it calms the “mind and nerves.” (Color meaning: Meaning of The Color Purple) A worker at the hospital in the text associates the colour purple as a medium or channel leading to death. The definition suits the character and profession of Leora Duncan, an employee of the service division of the Federal Bureau of Termination in terms of the luxury and power she holds as commended by her profession, the ambition to follow Dr. Hitz in her adoration of his policies for population control, also her elevated positioning as one chosen to be immortalized. The colour’s effect on the mind is right on target as she aids calm patients when they are about to die. Her positioning in the picture, cutting the branch of tree in the Garden of Life shows her true calling in cutting access or pruning channels sustaining life.

The visibility acquired by the worker and painter at the hospital draws one to make distinctions between the divergent ideologies in place. The two-pronged responses to the same pictures shows an intersection of multiple voices of the young and old, conventional and unconventional, propriety and impropriety, illusion and disillusion, and cleanliness and mess and more.

The numerical value ‘3’ is engaged repeatedly in relation to the number of children expected by Mr. Wehling, number of children born, the number of volunteers to be laid down, the number of gun shots etc. Mr. Wehling paradoxically introduces himself as the happy father, as he retrospects upon the situation he is in; indecisive on being happy about the safe birthing of his children, or being sad about losing two children for the lack of volunteers along with his maternal grandfather. Earlier in the text is a revelatory piece of information stating the number of births a day had become rare. At this junction, the Ethical Suicide Studios is mentioned, as the final destination for those wishing to end their lives. The analysis of the text suggests otherwise. The number of births have attained ceasure as one’s birth would mean another’s death, a policy made to ensure or keep the population under check; serving as a reminder that the term ‘volunteer’ is just namesake.

Mr. Wehling and Dr. Hitz engage in a debate as the two ends of the spectrum, wherein the ultimate decision is taken by the former in a dramatic moment when he shoots at Dr. Hitz and Leora Duncan before taking his own life to let his three children live. The three deaths indicate metaphorical decadence and death of the movement of modernism, being replaced by postmodernism occupying the vacant space much like the newborns. The painter who witnessed the scene brings closure to the story by using the number 2BR02B having comprehended the illogical situation called life, in complete opposition to the former decision of taking his own life; thereby contributing to the system and seeking aid for the cessation of his life and the story.

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