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MOTIFS IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF KURT VONNEGUT

(Bachelor Thesis)

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Natália Solárová

Affirmation

I hereby affirm that this thesis represents my own original research and writing and that I have referenced all appropriate source materials.

Date:

Natália Solárová

.....

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Abstrakt

SOLÁROVÁ, Natália: *Motívy v literárnych dielach Kurta Vonneguta* – Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave. Fakulta aplikovaných jazykov; Katedra jazykovedy a translatológie. – Vedúci záverečnej práce: Mgr. Silvia Adamcová, PhD. – Bratislava: FAJ EU, 2023, 36 s.

Cieľom predkladanej bakalárskej práce je charakterizovať motívy v literárnych dielach Kurta Vonneguta a objasniť vplyv spoločenskej a ekonomickej situácie na diela v americkej literatúre po druhej svetovej vojne. Ďalej opísať život autora Kurta Vonneguta a nájsť spojitost' skúseností z jeho života s literárnymi motívmi použitými v jeho dielach. Prvá kapitola bakalárskej práce sa sústreďuje na oboznámenie sa so spoločensko-ekonomickou situáciou v USA po druhej svetovej vojne, takisto aj s charakteristikou tendencií v americkej literatúre, ktoré vyplývajú zo zmien v spoločnosti. V druhej kapitole sa venujeme metodike a cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce. Tretia kapitola je praktická časť práce a pozostáva z komparatívnej analýzy diel Kurta Vonneguta. Výsledkom skúmania danej problematiky je analyzovanie diel a skúmania rozdielnosti použitých motívov autora.

Kľúčové slová: americká literatúra, Kurt Vonnegut, literárne motívy

Abstract

SOLÁROVÁ, Natália: *Motifs in the literary works of Kurt Vonnegut* – University of Economics in Bratislava. Faculty of Applied Languages; Department of Linguistics and Translation. – Thesis tutor: Mgr. Silvia Adamcová PhD. – Bratislava: FAJ EU, 2023. 36 p.

The aim of the presented bachelor thesis is to characterize the motifs in Kurt Vonnegut's literary works and to elucidate the impact of social and economic conditions on works in American literature after World War II. Furthermore, to describe the life of author Kurt Vonnegut and to find a connection between the experiences of his life and the literary motifs used in his works. This bachelor thesis consists of 4 chapters. The first chapter of the bachelor's thesis concentrates on the introduction to the socio-economic situation in the USA after World War II, also on the characterization of the tendencies in American literature resulting from the changes in society. The second chapter discusses the methodology and objectives of this thesis. The third chapter is the practical part of the thesis and consists of a comparative analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's works. As a result of the investigation of the issue, the works are analysed, and the differences of the motives used by the author are examined.

Key words: American literature, Kurt Vonnegut, literary motifs

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Introduction

A literary motif is a recurring image, symbol, or idea that appears in a work of literature. It can be a specific object, a phrase, a type of character, or any other element that is repeated throughout a text in a way that suggests it has symbolic significance. We must take into account that a literary motif is not the same as a theme. A theme is a broader idea or message that runs throughout a work of literature, while a motif is a specific element that is used to reinforce or develop a theme.

This bachelor thesis deals with the literary motifs in the works of Kurt Vonnegut a well-known American novelist whose works are notable for their unusual style and particular thematic topics. The usage of motifs, which are repeated pictures, symbols, or concepts that emerge throughout Vonnegut's work, is one of the most important aspects of his writing. These motifs serve several functions, including reinforcing themes, character development, and social commentary.

In this bachelor thesis, we examined different motifs that emerge in Vonnegut's works, such as the motif of supernatural, motif of time, and the motif of the phrase “so it goes” in his works *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. We provided a better understanding of the concepts and ideas important to Vonnegut's writing, as well as the literary strategies he employs to portray them, by examining these motifs.

We dealt with how the motifs mentioned above reflected American society at the time of publishing these two works of Kurt Vonnegut. American society in 1960s and 1970s underwent significant social and cultural change. The country experienced a series of transformations, from the civil rights movement and the feminist movement to the anti-war protests and the rise of the counterculture. These changes were reflected in all aspects of American society, from politics and popular culture to art and literature.

Our research provides sufficient background information for students of foreign languages and literature, specifically for students of American literature, by analyzing literary

motifs in the works of Kurt Vonnegut. Furthermore, we examined if the motifs chosen in this thesis reflected American society and in what extent.

Although Kurt Vonnegut wrote these novels almost five decades ago, his contribution to literature and culture in general is significant even nowadays. The main content of this thesis shows that some patterns and thoughts are relevant today and we should be aware of the past events to prevent them.

1 Literary review of the current state of research on the chosen topic at home and abroad

“Kurt Vonnegut's America” by Jerome Klinkowitz delves into Vonnegut's literary and cultural influences, examining the ways in which his experiences during World War II and the Cold War shaped his writing. The book also explores Vonnegut's views on politics, technology, and the environment, providing a comprehensive portrait of the author and his place in American literature.

In “Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut issued in 2009,” Klinkowitz collaborates with L. Donald Lawler to provide a broader overview of Vonnegut's life and work. The book covers Vonnegut's upbringing in Indiana, his experiences as a soldier during World War II, and his eventual success as a writer. The authors also analyze Vonnegut's major works, including “Slaughterhouse-Five” and “Cat's Cradle,” exploring the themes and literary techniques that make his writing so distinctive.

“Notable American Novelists: Revised Edition Volume 3 issued in 2007” is a reference book that provides information and critical analysis of the works of significant American novelists from the 20th century. Edited by Carl Rollyson, it features essays on over 150 authors, including John O'Hara and Richard Wright.

John O'Hara was an American novelist and short story writer known for his realistic depictions of American life in the mid-20th century. The essay on O'Hara in this book offers a comprehensive overview of his life and works, analyzing his recurring themes and literary techniques. It also examines the critical reception of O'Hara's writing, providing a context for understanding his place in American literature.

Richard Wright was an African American writer whose works addressed the social and political issues facing African Americans in the early 20th century. The essay on Wright in this book offers an in-depth analysis of his most famous works, including “Native Son” and “Black Boy.” It explores Wright's use of naturalism and his engagement with Marxist ideology, providing a nuanced perspective on his writing and its place in American literary history.

“Notable American Novelists: Revised Edition Volume 3” is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the history of American literature, offering a wealth of information and critical analysis of some of the most significant writers of the 20th century.

1.1 Situation after World War II

The end of World War II has changed the distribution of power in the world and had a global impact on the political situation for subsequent decades. The allied countries of the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain, who had the most merit in defeat of their enemies: Japan and Germany have had different viewpoint on the upcoming evolution of politics and society.

Although the United States entered the war after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, they assured their position as the only country that remained in excellent economic shape. The Cold War that lasted from the end of the World War II up to 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed has stimulated the American economic warfare.

“The great social effort involved in fighting World War II reorganized America's economy and altered its people's lifestyles. Post-war existence revealed different kinds of men and women, with new aspirations among both majority and minority populations. New possibilities for action empowered individuals and groups in the pursuit of personal freedom and individual self-expression.” (Baym, 2011, p. 3-4)

This has concluded into the improvement education level, when after war as much as 50 percent of the American population was college educated, which was unmatched by any other nation and unimaginable before war.

“Throughout the 1950s and into early 1960s, social critics perceived a stable conformity to American life, a dedication to an increasingly materialistic standard of living, whose ethical merit was ensured by a continuity with the prewar world – a continuity that proved to be delusory.” (Baym, 2011, p. 4)

The Sixties as we know them began on the 22nd of November 1963 when the then American president John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Following years has had significant impact on remedy of racial discrimination and continuance of the suffragette movement from the years of World War I what we now define as feminism.

Even the inconsistency in opinions of sending American soldiers to Vietnam was present, President Nixon expanded presence of American soldiers in Vietnam which led to protests and cultural revolution. The suffering of American politics was underlined by the Watergate scandal and eventually losing the Vietnam war by the collapse of Saigon in a disruptive way while losing around 58 thousand American soldiers.

1.1.1 Characteristic of American Literature after 1945

This half century was turbulent and led to a change of literature. Many important writers have contemplated what is the aim of literature and how to accomplish it. *“Conflicts between conformity and individuality, tradition and innovation, stability and disruption characterized the literature of the period as they also shaped historical and cultural milieu.”* (Baym, 2011, p. 7)

Society in the first two afterwar decades decided to take material advantage of the huge gains won by the global victory as well as writers tried to capitalize on the successes of previous literary generation. Afterwar cultural homogeneity was an ideal in terms of patriotism while resisting and fighting communism and materialistically while enjoying the profits of capitalistic society. (Cairns, 2018)

Many writers supposed that the ideal of homogeneity can represent the experience of the whole nation while leaving out differences of gender, race, religion, etc. Novelists were under the influence of Ernst Hemingway and believed that they had to imitate his works to be taken seriously. (O’Hara, 2007)

“Hence the desire to write what was called “the great American novel” – a major work that would characterize the larger aspects of national experience. Ambitions were not simply to write a war novel, for example, but the war novel: not just a work about corporate big business, but something that encapsulated the subject for all times.” (Baym, 2011, p. 9)

1.2 Motifs in Literature

The word “motif” comes from French and can be translated as “pattern,” therefore a motif is anything that appears repeatedly throughout the text. It might appear several times as an object, phrase, or symbol, and it can point to a bigger notion or subject, usually in similar settings.

For example, in Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Slaughterhouse Five," the lines “so it goes” are constantly used after a death is described. Noticing the contexts in which the motif arises provides the reader with insight into the wider message to which the author is referencing.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica a motif is “*an element that appears in a number of literary works. It differs from a theme, which it closely resembles, in that it is a concrete example of a theme.*”

1.2.1 Motifs in American literature of 20th century

The American Dream is a philosophy that states that everyone, regardless of background or social level, may achieve success and prosperity through hard work and persistence. This motif may be seen in numerous works of twentieth-century literature, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," which examines the corrupting influence of money and materialism on the American Dream.

Many twentieth-century American writers, particularly in the aftermath of World Wars I and II, explored the themes of alienation and disillusionment. Characters who feel estranged from society or who are seeking to find their place in the world are frequently depicted by this motif. For example, J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" depicts a protagonist who is estranged from his friends and disillusioned with the adult world.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained traction in the 1960s, many writers began to address issues of race and racism in their writings. Characters that are disadvantaged or oppressed due of their race are frequently depicted as struggling to affirm their identity and

attain equality. For example, James Baldwin's "Go Tell It on the Mountain" examines African American experiences in a racist culture, whereas Toni Morrison's "Beloved" examines the legacy of slavery and its impact on African American identity.

As technology advanced, writers began to investigate the impact of technology and modernity on society and individuals. This subject is frequently represented by characters who are wrestling with the ethical consequences of scientific development or who are attempting to adjust to a fast-changing reality. For example, Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Slaughterhouse-Five" investigates the effects of conflict and technology on human civilisation.

Many twentieth-century writers studied existentialist issues, which centre on the meaning and purpose of human existence. This concept is frequently expressed by characters seeking meaning or identity in a chaotic and meaningless environment. For example, Albert Camus' "The Stranger" delves into the protagonist's existential dilemma as he attempts to find meaning in his life.

1.2.2 Science fiction

According to Jerome Klinkowitz (1977) Kurt Vonnegut's job in General Electric was supposed to offer him a respectful membership in American middle-class society, but instead it gave him an idea and knowledge about innovations and led him to express his artistic disposition in his first finished novel, *Player Piano* (1952). In that novel he described his current life and implied a viewpoint on advancing technology for people and control that corporations held over its employees.

Kurt Vonnegut insisted that his writing reflects his function in society, and it reacts to life itself. That explain the reasons why he was writing about technologies and science although he did not consider himself as a science-fictionist. (Broer, 1994)

As Jerome Klinkowitz (2009) further explains, the science-fictionist reputation of Kurt Vonnegut caused, that he was not recognized by literary critics, and either was not interesting for readers. Moreover, his subject of technologies being used to destroy the world was

uncomfortable for public since the stories and fortunes from Vietnam were still resonating in people's minds.

“Once mistakenly typed as a science fiction writer, Vonnegut is now recognized as a mainstream storyteller often fascinated by the tragic and comic possibilities of machines.” (Bergstorm, 2009)

Willis E. McNelly (1969) explains that Vonnegut has tried to dissociate himself from the genre of science fiction since writing *Rosewater* (1965). The main reason is the persisting unrespectability of that genre and that concludes to low salary from the publishers. Yet this genre seemed to be the most suitable for expressing Vonnegut's thoughts on different subjects.

Kurt Vonnegut claimed that the reason why he used science fiction in the book *Slaughterhouse-Five* was truly intuitive and without strategy and its purpose was to ease the heavy topic of the book before he would introduce something serious again. Readers were also more likely to face the unreality of science fiction while portraying real disasters. In other words, Vonnegut used science fiction as some kind of joke and that reflect his position in that genre. (Aldiss, 1973)

1.2.3 Motif of time

Kurt Vonnegut frequently explored non-linear storylines, time travel, and flashbacks in his writing to produce a distinctive reading experience. Many authors frequently use the Vonnegut's use of time to investigate how individuals generate meaning and understanding from the passage of time, as well as how time and memory affect human experience. (Davis, 2008)

Vonnegut examines the concept of time in many of his works by flitting back and forth between various points in the past, present, and future. This enables him to investigate issues like memory, trauma, and the effects of the past on the present. (Hipkiss, 1984)

For instance, Vonnegut employs time travel in his most well-known work, “*Slaughterhouse-Five*,” to jump back and forth between several points in the life of the

protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, including his time as a POW (prisoner of war) during World War II and his subsequent life as an optometrist.

The absurdity of human existence is frequently highlighted by Vonnegut's use of time, as humans are frequently rendered helpless in the face of more overarching historical forces that influence their lives. As he strives to understand how individuals create meaning and purpose in a world that frequently appears chaotic and meaningless, Vonnegut's use of time is frequently connected to his wider humanist themes in this way. (Hicks, 2020)

In summary, Vonnegut uses time as a key motif in his writing, enabling him to examine humanism, absurdity, memory, trauma, and other subjects in fresh and original ways.

1.2.4 “*So it goes*”

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the line “so it goes” served as a kind of refrain or motif that appears after every reference of death, no matter how minor or serious the death is. It presented a reminder that death is an unavoidable aspect of life, and that no matter how much we try to escape it, we must all confront it at some point.

The term appears throughout the novel in several circumstances, ranging from the death of a minor character to the World War II bombing of Dresden. It's a simple sentence, yet it conveys a profound and emotional sense of resignation and acceptance.

In some ways, “so it goes” can be viewed as a coping method for dealing with life's catastrophes. Recognizing death as an unavoidable part of life allows us to go on and find meaning in our experiences, especially in the face of sorrow and loss.

At the same time, the statement emphasizes the futility and senselessness of war and bloodshed. The bombing of Dresden is depicted in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a brutal and mindless act of destruction, and the phrase “so it goes” is used to express fury and regret over the loss of life.

Overall, the phrase "so it goes" is a powerful and unforgettable reminder of the fragility of existence, the certainty of death, and the necessity to find purpose in our experiences, even when tragedy and loss occur.

Slaughterhouse-Five's line "so it goes" was first published in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War. The war was a deeply polarizing issue in the United States and around the world at the time, and many people were struggling to come to grips with the needless violence and loss of life.

The phrase "so it goes" took on a new meaning in this context, serving as a kind of shorthand for the attitude of resignation and acceptance that many people felt about the war. It was a way of acknowledging the tragic loss of life and senseless devastation while also accepting that little could be done to stop it.

In many ways, the word reflected the tone of the time, as people grappled with the awful events happening around them. It expressed a deep sense of sorrow and helplessness, as well as perseverance and desire to persevere in the face of hardship. (Thomas, 2006)

Even in the face of sorrow and loss, the phrase "so it goes" continues to resonate with people as a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the need to find meaning and purpose in our lives.

1.3 Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut is a counterculture hero in the wild 1960s and his works were bestseller even decades later. To his readers he offered cultural idealism in the times when many felt like their country has abandoned them in a simple understandable way.

"For a broader readership who felt conventional fiction was inadequate to express the way their lives had been disrupted by the era's radical social changes, he wrote novels structured in more pertinently contemporary terms, bereft of such unifying devices as conclusive characterization and chronologically organized plots." (Baym, 2011, p. 373)

The parallel between his personal life and social life in afterwar America is apparent. His mother has dissipated inherited money, his father has experienced lack of job opportunity and his extended family was moving a lot for seeking a career. (Allen, 2009)

Kurt Vonnegut was influenced by his service in World War II as an infantryman and he used his knowledge and experience in loads of his works. We can conclude that he has shared these formative experiences with his whole generation.

Vonnegut was especially interested in how technology affected society, particularly the dehumanizing impacts of industrialisation and the emergence of computers and other types of automation. In his novel "Player Piano," Kurt Vonnegut imagines a future in which computers have mostly supplanted human labour, causing widespread unemployment and social turmoil.

Vonnegut tackles the risks of scientific development and technological innovation in other works, such as "Cat's Cradle" and "Galapagos," depicting them as potentially destructive forces that threaten to destabilize society and undermine human ideals.

Vonnegut's connection with technology was nuanced and diverse in general. While recognizing the potential benefits of technological innovation, he was suspicious of its impact on human civilization and frequently used his writing to critique and ridicule the excesses and dangers of modern technology.

2 The objective and methods of this work

In this chapter of the bachelor thesis, we describe our main objective and selected methods that we use by writing this thesis.

The main aim of this bachelor thesis in the theoretical part of our work is to characterise and describe the main motifs in the literary works of Kurt Vonnegut. We tried to describe the social and economic situation in the United States after the World War II and its impact on literature. We also described the American author Kurt Vonnegut, who was one of the most significant writers in this era. The motifs in his works were described and analysed.

To reach our objective, we used several research methods. The first method used in our thesis was literary research. We read many relatable books, from which the suitable information and themes were selected. The other method was analysis that was used to find the relation of the literary motifs with the atmosphere in the American society at the time of writing these novels. This strategy was developed after a thorough literature assessment. In the research part, we proposed to find similarities and reflections of American society on the chosen motifs in two of Kurt Vonnegut's novels – *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* and also proposed to find a critique on American society developed through both of these novels.

This characteristic and analysis were completed by deductive approach and analogical reasoning. Deductive research approach investigates a known theory or phenomenon and determines whether it is valid in the given conditions. The deductive approach most closely follows the path of logic. The reasoning process begins with a theory and progresses to a new hypothesis. This theory is put to the test by subjecting it to observations that either confirm or reject the hypothesis. Analogical reasoning is any type of thinking that relies upon an analogy, which is a comparison of two objects or systems of objects that emphasizes areas where they are perceived to be comparable.

Characteristic was examined thanks to abstraction and concretization. Abstraction is a practice of taking away or removing qualities from something to reduce it to a collection of basic traits. The process of concretization of general principle or idea is particularizing or exemplifying it.

3 Research and discussion

In this part of the bachelor thesis, it was dealt with the characteristics of two works of Kurt Vonnegut, more precisely with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. These two works were also compared based on the fact, whether there is any correlation with the content of the books with the situation in American society.

Moreover, we have described the motifs in both works and compared them and tried to find similarities or differences at this level.

Hypotheses of the research part of the bachelor thesis are:

We suppose that Kurt Vonnegut's recurrent motifs of time, supernatural motif, and the motif of the phrase “so it goes” serve as a means of reflecting society and highlighting the human condition in the US during the war in Vietnam.

We suppose that the motifs of time, motif of supernatural, and the phrase “so it goes” express his critique of American society and its emphasis on efficiency and conformity.

The results of this research were presented in the end of this chapter. We came to the conclusions considering the information, that was gained from the literature research while analysing works of many literary scientists. We have also taken to consideration research approaches, such as analogy and deduction, that are described on a previous page of the thesis.

3.1 Slaughterhouse- Five and its reflection of American society

Kurt Vonnegut was inspired to write anti-war novel Slaughterhouse-Five probably because of his own experience, when he served in the US Army during the World War II as an infantryman. This novel is widely regarded as one of the most influential works of post-war American literature. It was first published in 1969 during the occurring Vietnam war.

Therefore, we may assume, that he has related to the main character of Slaughterhouse-Five Billy, Pilgrim. Many sources presume, that the reason why he wrote this novel was because of his inability to deal with his experience in different way.

In the book Understanding Kurt Vonnegut, he remarked: *“There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre”* (Vonnegut, 1991/88, p. 77). There was significant frustration from the event he had to go through, and he further explained: *“I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it, and WROTE ABOUT IT...”* (Vonnegut, 1991/88, p.77).

Vonnegut himself stated that: *“I was present in the greatest massacre in European history, which was the destruction of Dresden by fire bombing”* (Vonnegut, 1991/88, p.3).

The following citation from book Slaughterhouse-Five describe the terrific events Vonnegut himself encountered, while he was held as POW (prisoner of war) in Dresden, Germany at the end of the World War II. The style of his writing may seem very indifferent or even inattentive, which may reflect his attitude towards his own memories, despite the disturbing and traumatizing conditions.

“All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names” (Vonnegut, slgt5, px).

3.2 Motifs of Kurt Vonnegut used in the work Slaughterhouse-Five

Considering the previously stated motifs in theoretical part we were able to compare and find out whether the motifs stated before were present in the work Slaughterhouse-Five.

3.2.1 Motif of time in the work Slaughterhouse-Five

According to the literature we have collected and studied, there is a dominant occurrence of the motif of time in the book Slaughterhouse-Five. This novel portrayed the main protagonist Billy Pilgrim, who becomes “unstuck in time” and lived his life out of the regular chronological order. Thanks to this motif, Vonnegut was able to examine the impact of time on human experience and the idea of having free will.

We can consider the motif of time as a mean to dissociate from the presence of war and the fact that American society tried to pre-empt the presence of American citizens in Vietnam, however, it did not help, so the idea of being “unstuck in time” can be relevant for the citizens and soldiers as well.

The concept of time in this novel is portrayed as arbitrary and unimportant and it created the sense of confusion simultaneously for the protagonist Billy Pilgrim and for the audience.

As the Slaughterhouse Five was published in 1969 during the Vietnam war we can assume that the intention of Kurt Vonnegut was to capture the madness and confusion of the soldiers fighting in Vietnam as well as the American society that was divided in the issue of supporting the war.

We can suppose that the idea of missing chronological concept of time functions as a mirror to the American society at the time of writing this novel. There was the sweet taste of victory after the World War II but simultaneously the bitterness of the Vietnam war. The economic and social development after the World War II was changed to the generational trauma of Vietnam that lasts until now.

The absurdity and confusion of time was probably used to create the sense of mental state of the protagonist who overcame the horrors of the war. Idea of missing the chronological concept of time reveals the inability of the protagonist and presumably the author as well, to accept the consequences and active participation in war.

“The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (Vonnegut, 1969, p. XX).

Conclusively, the motif of time is the main motif used in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and it provide the support for the anti-war character of this novel by highlighting the confusion of time, as well as the state of the protagonist. It also reflects the turbulent time of the Vietnam war and the confusion of the US citizens at the time.

3.2.2 The supernatural motifs in the novel Slaughterhouse-Five

The motif of present aspects of supernatural were important throughout the whole plot of the novel. Supernatural elements were declared in form of time travel and the existence of aliens, which were part of the plot.

Previously mentioned elements of supernatural were present in the novel to explore deeper existential issues, for instance experiencing trauma, the concept of free will and the meaning of life, etc.

Prominent supernatural element is the occurrence of aliens – Tralfamadorians, which were interacting with the main protagonist Billy Pilgrim. One of the attributes of these aliens was their unprecedented perception of time, while their timeline was not sequential rather simultaneous as they experienced seeing all moments at once.

This characteristic questioned the existence of free will and fate in relation to the non-existent avoidance of participating in war conflicts, whether as a soldier or any civilian. Hence,

this motif also supports Vonnegut's anti-war message in this novel and supports the hypothesis that his writing reflects the American society.

The use of technologies started to rapidly spread after the World War II and the life was faster and more structured. The number of college degrees was rising, and it also supported the faster technological growth. Existence of extraterrestrial creatures in Slaughterhouse Five – the Tralfamadorians could reflect the increasing space exploration in the 50s and 60s in the United States.

Another important point that Vonnegut made by usage of supernatural elements was the senselessness and absurdity of war. He contrasted the destruction and trauma of war that humans underwent with the intelligence and technological knowledge of aliens, which considered war as something primitive and inhuman.

“He had been kidnapped by a flying saucer from Tralfamadore, and they were taking him to their planet to mate him with a movie star named Montana Wildhack” (Vonnegut, chapt 2).

Therefore, we suppose that it is another connection between the content of this work and the social situation in the United States. Supernatural elements provided the sense of unreal situations and reflected on the American society. For instance how the soldiers tried to dissociate from the reality of war and on the other hand the civilians back home were enjoying technologies such as television, in order to leave reality as well. In conclusion, there is a strong reflection of the elements of supernatural used in the plot of this book.

3.2.3 Phrase “so it goes” as the permanent motif in Slaughterhouse-Five

The phrase “so it goes” as we stated in the theoretical part of the thesis was used by Vonnegut every time when someone died or when the death occurred in the plot. Moreover, the fact that this phrase appeared in the novel exactly 106 times only underline the importance of it.

On the other hand, the frequent occurrence of this phrase in the novel strengthened the idea that death is part of life, and it is inevitable. On the contrary, Vonnegut expressed the dissent to unnecessary deaths in the war, hence this phrase seemed to be satirical.

The phrase alone was popularized thanks to Kurt Vonnegut, and it is possible that some people has used it as a stock phrase, that means that a certain person or group of people incorporated this phrase into their own language.

In the first place, we examined the meaning behind this phrase rather than the phrase alone and how it reflected the American society. The occurrence of death was present when the author wrote this novel. People in the United States faced death caused in Vietnam through newspaper, television, or broadcasting. Many of them were affected directly, when one of their relative died in the frontline.

We assume that the meaning behind this phrase had direct connection with the atmosphere in the American society. At the beginning of war, it was something horrific to lose citizens, but after some time, when the numbers of dead were increasing it has become something irrelevant. The society was numb and the phrase “so it goes” provided some protection to harsh reality.

To sum up, we detected that this phrase reflected the atmosphere in the society. The satirical subtext showed the irrationality of this war and the opinions of society on this topic, but did not diminish the loss, trauma or impact on individuals or society.

3.3 Breakfast of champions and its relation to American society

Kurt Vonnegut published a novel *Breakfast of Champions* four years after the *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in 1973. This is a postmodern satirical novel characterized by irrelevant humour and absurdity with the aim of commenting American society. Another name for this novel was *Goodbye Blue Monday*.

The *Breakfast of Champions* is a complex and challenging work of fiction that uses a range of postmodern techniques to explore some of the key issues facing American society in the late 20th century.

The storyline is represented by two protagonists – Dwayne Hoover, who is a wealthy businessman developing mental illness and Kilgore Trout, who is described as a struggling science fiction writer.

It is structured as a series of loosely connected vignettes that jump back and forth in time, often with little regard for chronological order. The novel is self-aware and frequently draws attention to its own status as a work of fiction, and is a biting satire of American culture, particularly its consumerist excesses and social inequalities.

The characters in the novel are often caricatures, with exaggerated personalities and motivations, which serves to highlight the absurdity of their actions and the limitations of their worldviews. Additionally, the novel explores several postmodern themes, including the relationship between language and reality, the fragmentation of identity, and the way in which meaning is constructed through cultural narratives.

3.3.1 The motif of time in the work “Breakfast of Champions” and its connection to American society

The motif of time in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Breakfast of Champions* is used to explore the concept of human mortality and the limitations of our existence.

One of the main themes of the novel is the idea that time is a limited resource that cannot be controlled or manipulated. The characters in the novel are all subject to the passage of time and are forced to confront their own mortality as a result. This is particularly evident in the character of Kilgore Trout, a struggling science fiction writer who is acutely aware of the fleeting nature of human life.

Another way in which the motif of time is explored in *Breakfast of Champions* is using flashbacks and non-linear storytelling. The novel jumps back and forth in time, highlighting the

way in which past events continue to shape the present. This serves to underscore the idea that time is not a linear progression, but rather a complex web of interconnected moments.

According to this knowledge we can presume that this usage of time that happened to be delivered through flashbacks and non-linearity described the chaos that was present in American society. However, the time in this novel was also linear and we assume that it depicted the economic prosperity and positive state of the society, but on the other hand the flashbacks meant the uncertainty of individuals and society.

The motif of time is used to explore the concept of free will and the limitations of human agency. The characters in the novel are all struggling to make sense of their lives but are ultimately constrained by the limitations imposed by time and circumstance. This sense of futility is particularly evident in the character of Dwayne Hoover, who becomes increasingly unhinged as he realizes that he is powerless to change his own destiny.

The 60s and 70s gifted American society with the limitless options concerning technological and economic prosperity, that was something they could not imagine years before. That led to the fact, that people had power over their own destiny and the time they were given. In the end it turns out it might have been just an illusion, while there were certain obligations, for instance joining the army or fitting into gender and social norms.

Overall, the motif of time in *Breakfast of Champions* serves to highlight the fundamental limitations of the human experience, and the ways in which we are all subject to the whims of fate and circumstance.

3.3.2 The motif of supernatural reflecting American society

One way in which the motif of supernatural is used in the novel is as a vehicle for social commentary. Kilgore Trout, the struggling science fiction writer, is often used as a mouthpiece for Vonnegut's own criticisms of American culture and politics. Through Trout's stories, Vonnegut can explore a range of contemporary issues, from consumerism and advertising to environmental degradation and the dangers of nuclear war.

The threat of a nuclear war was heavily discussed in the American society in the 60s when this risk began. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union concerning the placement of the ballistic missiles in Cuba. This action led to chaos and fear in American society and people were concerned about the beginning of third world war and supposed it can lead to using nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the motif of supernatural is also used to highlight the limitations of human knowledge and understanding. The characters in the novel are often struggling to make sense of a world that is rapidly changing and evolving, and supernatural motif serves as a means of exploring the unknown and the unexplainable. For example, Trout's stories often deal with time travel, parallel universes, and other speculative concepts that challenge our conventional understanding of reality.

Finally, the motif of supernatural is also used to explore the power of imagination and creativity. Kilgore Trout's stories are often dismissed as “trashy” or “unimportant,” but Vonnegut suggests that they have the potential to inspire and uplift, offering a glimpse of a better, more hopeful future.

Overall, the motif of supernatural in *Breakfast of Champions* serves as a mean of critiquing contemporary society, exploring the unknown, and celebrating the power of imagination and creativity.

In conclusion we have stated several characteristics to the motifs used in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. Based on that we state that the motif of time reflected the American society thanks to reasons stated previously in this thesis. It also criticizes the American society in the means of confusion the motif of time caused in the novels and how the society acted during the Vietnam war, they were confused and lost in time. On the other hand, we cannot take this critique in a negative way, because we can see these signs of responses in the author's responses as well.

The motif of supernatural in both of these novels examined shows, that Kurt Vonnegut reflected the happening in the United States and also used this motif to criticize the society, mostly consumerism. As we stated before, the American economy and technologies were on a

rise at the time and we also mentioned how the society responded to these new inventions, so for the author, there were reasons for critique.

The motif of the phrase “so it goes” in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* was a reflection as well as critique towards Americans. The reason for that presumably was the rise of individualism and little to no regret over lives lost in a war, only regretted the whole concept of was not the lives themselves.

Conclusion

In order to explore the literary motifs in the works of Kurt Vonnegut, we chose to focus on two of his most well-known novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. These novels are not only significant works of literature, but they also provide a window into the social and cultural landscape of the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Through his writing, Vonnegut offers a critical and often satirical perspective on American society, politics, and culture.

The historical events of the World War II and the Vietnam war had a profound impact on American society and culture, and Vonnegut's works offer insights into the after-effects of these events. By examining the literary motifs present in his works, we can better understand how Vonnegut used his writing to reflect on and criticize various aspects of American society.

In the theoretical part of our bachelor thesis, we discussed the social and economic environment in the United States during the post World War II era and the impact of the Vietnam War on American society. We also highlighted the importance of Kurt Vonnegut as an American writer and discussed the literary motifs he frequently employed in his works, such as the supernatural motif, motif of time, and the motif of the phrase “so it goes”.

In the research part of our thesis, we focused on analyzing and characterizing the literary motifs present in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. We examined how these motifs were used to comment on and critique various aspects of American society, such as the dehumanizing effects of war, the disillusionment of the counterculture movement, and the emptiness of modern life. We also proposed hypotheses about the meaning and significance of these motifs in Vonnegut's works and tested them through close textual analysis.

Conclusively, our bachelor thesis seeks to shed light on the literary motifs used by Kurt Vonnegut in his works, and how they reflect and criticize American society during the 1960s and 1970s. By analyzing these motifs, we gain a deeper understanding of Vonnegut's perspective on the world around him, and the enduring relevance of his writing today.

Resumé

Literárny motív je opakujúci sa element, ktorý sa vyskytuje v literárnom diele a dotvára jeho tému, náladu alebo symboliku. Avšak motív môže byť akýkoľvek opakujúci sa prvok, napríklad, slová, frázy, predmety, atď. Motívy sa v dielach vyskytujú bez ohľadu na literárny druh, či žáner a takisto sa vyskytuje vo veľkej časti neliterárneho umenia.

Motívy môžu byť explicitné alebo implicitné. Explicitné motívy sú jasne vysvetlené a opakujú sa v celom diele, zatiaľ čo implicitné motívy sú menej zrejmé a vyžadujú si bližší výklad a analýzu. Literárne motívy pomáhajú autorom prenášať svoje myšlienky a názory a umožňujú čitateľom lepšie porozumieť téme, ktorou sa autor zaoberá. Motívy môžu tiež pomôcť vytvoriť konkrétnu náladu alebo atmosféru, pridať hĺbku postavám a pomôcť pri vytváraní symboliky.

V tejto bakalárskej práci sme sa zamerali práve na analýzu literárnych motívov v dielach Kurta Vonneguta. Kurt Vonnegut bol americký spisovateľ, najznámejší pre svoje diela v žánri satirickej a sci-fi literatúry. Narodil sa v americkom štáte Indiana a počas druhej svetovej vojny slúžil v armáde Spojených štátov.

Medzi jeho najznámejšie a najvplyvnejšie diela zaradujeme romány ako Bitúnok č. 5, Raňajky šampiónov a Mechanický klavír, ktoré obsahujú silné satirické prvky a sú často kritické k vojne, spoločnosti a ľudskej existencii vo všeobecnosti. Jeho práca často obsahuje vtipné a absurdné situácie, čím reflektuje na humor a tragédiu ľudskej skúsenosti.

Vonnegut bol tiež známy pre svoju neobvyklú štruktúru a štýl písania, ktorý využíva opakovanie, krátke vety a prvky sci-fi a fantastiky. Okrem svojho písania bol Vonnegut aj aktívnym obhajcom slobodného prejavu a verejne sa vyjadroval proti vojne a násiliu. Jeho vplyvné diela a odkaz na literárnu scénu a spoločnosť zostávajú silné dodnes.

V tejto bakalárskej práci sme sa zamerali na motív času, motív využitia nadprirodzených prvkov a používanie frázy „so it goes“, teda v slovenskom preklade „tak to chodí“ v súvislosti s dianím v americkej spoločnosti po druhej svetovej vojne. Udalosti druhej svetovej vojny významne ovplyvnili život v Spojených štátoch amerických, najmä vďaka ekonomickému, spoločenskému a kultúrnemu rozmachu.

Desať rokov po jej skončení sa USA zapojilo do vojny vo Vietname. Pre americkú spoločnosť to znamenalo spôsobenie traumy, keďže vo Vietname sa americkým vojakom nedarilo a správy v televízii a novinách boli zaplavené negatívnymi dôsledkami z frontu.

Kvôli týmto súvislostiam sa diela Kurta Vonneguta považujú za protivojnové, keďže vznikali v dobe Vietnamskej vojny a autor sa sám zúčastnil druhej svetovej vojny počas bombardovania mesta Drážďany.

Cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce bolo nájsť súvis medzi horeuvedenými motívmi v dielach Bitúnok č. 5 a Raňajky šampiónov od Kurta Vonneguta s dianím a zmenami v americkej spoločnosti. Skúmali sme prítomnosť týchto motívov v dielach a ako reflektovali americkú spoločnosť a ich vnímanie aktuálnych tém.

Zvolenú tému sme skúmali vďaka rôznorodým výskumným metódam. Po naštudovaní množstva literatúry, ktorá skúma diela americkej literatúry po druhej svetovej vojne, literárne diela Kurta Vonneguta, ale aj literatúry, ktorá skúma historické okolnosti a ich vplyv na spoločnosť.

Ďalšou výskumnou metódou boli rôzne spôsoby myslenia, ako je napríklad dedukcia, indukcia, či konkretizácia a abstrahovanie. Vďaka týmto postupom sme boli schopní prísť k záveru, že motívy použité v dielach Kurta Vonneguta reflektujú americkú spoločnosť a zároveň ju kritizujú. Kritiku však v tomto prípade nemožno vykladať vyslovene ako niečo negatívne, skôr ide o satirickú a implicitnú reflexiu spoločnosti.

Prínos diel amerického spisovateľa Kurta Vonneguta je významný aj v dobe, viac ako polstoročie po napísaní jeho diel. Protivojnový nádech jeho diel má relevanciu, žiaľ, aj v dnešnej dobe. Kurt Vonnegut sa stal inšpiráciou pre mnohých autorov nasledujúcej literárnej generácie. Medzi nich patrí napríklad Neil Gaiman, či David Foster Wallace.

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