

لم أقل إلا الحقيقة: السرد غير الموثوق ومسألة المصداقية التاريخية في رواية السجين

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“I only told the truth”: Unreliable Narration and the Question of Historical Authenticity in *Jailbird*

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ملخص

تُعد رواية السجين للكاتب كورت فونيغوت واحدة من أبرز الأمثلة على الخيال القصصي الميتا-التاريخي. تتتبع الرواية حياة والتر إف. ستارباك التي تتكشف أحداثها بالتوازي مع سلسلة من الوقائع التاريخية الجسيمة، مثل الحركة العمالية، وإعدام ساكو وفانزيتي، والكساد الكبير، والحرب العالمية الثانية، وفضيحة ووترغيت؛ حيث تتقاطع هذه الأحداث التاريخية مع أحداث خيالية. وعلاوة على ذلك، تمزج الرواية ببراعة بين الشخصيات التاريخية والخيالية لطمس الحدود الفاصلة بين التاريخ والخيال. وبوصفها عملاً ينتمي إلى هذا النوع الأدبي، تقدم الرواية راوياً غير موثوق يتشكل سرده بفعل ذاكرة مجزأة، وضمير مثقل بالشعور بالذنب، وتحيزات شخصية، مما يجعل السرد أشبه بوثيقة دفاعية منه إلى سرد صادق لأحداث الماضي. إنه يمزج التاريخ بالخيال بطريقة تترك القارئ وتجعله عاجزاً عن التمييز بين ما هو حقيقي وما هو خيالي من أحداث وشخصيات. ومن هذا المنظور، قد يرى المرء للوهلة الأولى أن التاريخ في الرواية غير موثوق وأن سرد ستارباك يفنر إلى الأصالة التاريخية. ومع ذلك، يهدف هذا المقال إلى إثبات أن سرد

ستارباك، رغم كونه غير موثوق يتسم بالأصالة؛ لأنه يعكس بدقة الحقبة الزمنية التي يتناولها. ولتحقيق ذلك، يوظف المقال نموذج الراوي غير الموثوق الذي وضعه أنسغار نونينغ لتحديد مواطن عدم الموثوقية لدى ستارباك، ثم يحلل كيف يساعد هذا السرد القراء على فهم الأحداث التاريخية التي يحاول ستارباك تصويرها. وبذلك، يبرهن المقال على أن عدم موثوقية ستارباك لا تحول دون تحقيق فونينغوت للأصالة التاريخية في عمله.

Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Jailbird* is one of the best example of historiographic metafiction. It follows the life story of Walter F. Starbuck which unfolds alongside a series of horrifying historical events, such as the labour movement, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Watergate scandal. These events occur side by side with fictional ones. Moreover, the novel brilliantly mixes historical with fictional figures to blur the line between history and fiction. Being a historiographic metafiction, *Jailbird* introduces an unreliable narrator whose narration is shaped by fragmented memory, guilty mind, and personal biases which makes it more like a defense document than a true account of past events. He mixes history with fiction in a way that confuses readers and makes them unsure which events and personages are real and which ones are fictional. In this sense, one might at first glance consider the novel's history as unreliable and Starbuck's narration as inauthentic. Yet, this article aims at proving that Starbuck's narration, though unreliable, is authentic because it represents the era it seeks to represent. It adapts Ansgar Nünning's model of unreliable narrator to detect where Starbuck's unreliability occurs. Then, it analyzes how Starbuck's narration helps readers understand the historical events he tries to portrays. In doing so, the present article shows that Starbuck's unreliability does not prevent Vonnegut from achieving historical authenticity.

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut's ninth novel, *Jailbird*, presents itself as the “autobiography” (171) of Walter F. Starbuck who narrates his life story through extended flashbacks. Although his narrative is intended to be personal, it can be viewed as a portrait of the political and historical scene of his time. From the very beginning of the first chapter, Starbuck announces that “years as well as people are characters in this book” (1). By doing so, he stresses the fact that history in the novel is more important than his own life story. Yet, one cannot consider the novel to be a documentary. Vonnegut does not intend his novel to be an easy



history. He mixes historical events and personages with Starbuck's fictional narrative to draw attention to the fictionality of history.

Jailbird is part of a large movement that emerged through the second half of the twentieth century known as postmodernism. It is characterized by what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1993, 72). Where the world used to believe that truth is inherited in the grand major narratives that frame people's understanding of the world around them, Lyotard came to suggest that postmodernism has lost its belief in such narratives and thus it was the time for small, local narratives to come to the scene. This shift in focus has extended to historical studies. Postmodernists began to see history not as one single version of history, but rather a “multiplicity of histories” (Jenkins 2003, 78). Thus, no single version can claim its full authority of the past.

Postmodernism emphasized the fact that the past can only be accessed through its textual traces. That is, all past knowledge is framed through the historians' interpretations of past records. The historian's job is to collect past traces found in fragments and form a narrative out of them in a process which Hayden White refers to as “emplotment” (1973, 7). This emplotment is similar to the way a novelist shapes his story forming the novel's plot. Drawing on White's work, Linda Hutcheon presented what she termed as ‘historiographic metafiction’ which refers to those “popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (1988, 5). Although such novels claim to be based on true events, these novels incorporate true events with fictional ones to raise questions about the authenticity of historical records.

Historiographic metafiction often utilizes an unreliable narrator, in first- or third-person, in the process of writing the story. By doing so, it presents a medium to question the process through which history is written. Although the first instances of the unreliable narrator can be dated back to the late nineteenth century, it was not until the post-WWII era that this literary device witnessed a wide popularity (Nünning 1997, 91-4). The reason behind this popularity in the postmodern era is people's awareness that the narrator is also a human-being with flaws and limitations (Nünning qtd. in Olson 2003, 97), and thus his narration cannot be fully trusted.

Although much scholarly work has been dedicated to investigating the implications of Hutcheon's theory to Vonnegut's novels, *Jailbird* has received only little attention in that regard. Iram Qureshi (2017) and Peter Freese (1999) address the question of historical authenticity in *Jailbird*, though indirectly, through investigating Vonnegut's blending of historical

facts with fictional invention. On the one hand, Qureshi starts his argument by claiming that “Vonnegut resists the very idea of authenticity associated with American social and political discourses” (2017, 8). Yet, he only touches on the question of historical authenticity very briefly. He highlights how Vonnegut reconstructs the American history to give voice to those who have been ignored or marginalized and to shed light on the inaccuracies in the American history. By putting side by side some of the novel’s events with their corresponding historical events, Qureshi highlights the distortions, manipulation, and inaccuracies found in historical records. Freese, on the other hand, provides a thorough insight into Vonnegut’s betrayed of some of the major historical events in the twentieth century America, even though he never mentioned Hutcheon’s theory in his argument. Freese centers his argument on the portrayal of the American dream in the novel, asserting its failure in the face of a corrupt political system.

However, no research has been dedicated to investigating the role of unreliable narration in achieving/challenging historical authenticity in the novel. Consequently, the present article fills this gap by answering two questions. First, how Starbuck’s narration is proved to be unreliable. Second, how his unreliability contributes to the question of historical authenticity. To address these questions, this article starts by introducing the concept of unreliable narrator with a focus on Ansgar Nünning’s model of signifiers that helps readers identify when a narrator is unreliable. It then examines how historical authenticity differs from historical accuracy. Finally, it demonstrates how *Jailbird*’s narrator is unreliable, yet his narrative is authentic.

1.Unreliable Narration in Historiographic Metafiction

The first mention of the term unreliable narrator in literary studies goes back to 1961 in which Wayne Booth first introduced and coined the term in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He argues that “a narrator [is] reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not” (1983, 158–59). His definition becomes very popular that no other scholar after him has ever presented a different definition, even though some have presented different arguments that challenged Booth’s. Ansgar Nünning believes that the problem with Booth’s definition is that it labels a narrator unreliable compared to the implied author, which is itself an “ill-defined and paradoxical” term (1997, 86). For him, the concept of unreliable narrator is used by critics as a mask under which



they hide their own values and beliefs, pretending they are the implied author's. In that sense, it can be argued that the narrator in Booth's definition is unreliable when he does not match the critics'/readers' norms or their perception of this character. Thus, Vera Nünning refers to the concept of unreliable narrator as “historically variable,” meaning that the concept changes over time and from one critic to another depending on their own morals and beliefs (qtd. in Olson 2003, 97). Therefore, Greta Olson concludes that this unreliability is “a strategy for reading texts rather than a text-immanent phenomenon” (2003, 97).

Ansgar Nünning, building on the work of Kathleen Wall, suggests that the reader's own background knowledge plays a role in identifying narration unreliability. This, Nünning argues, depends on the referentiality of the literary text to the real world of the reader: if the text does not align with the reader's common-sense, general world-knowledge, cultural standards, agreed-upon moral and ethical standards, then the narrator is considered to be unreliable. Moreover, the reader's background knowledge in literary conventions and genres plays a crucial role in helping him identify the narrator's unreliability. For instance, what makes a narrator unreliable in realist fiction differs from that of science fiction (1997, 99-101).

Ansgar Nünning identifies a set of textual signifiers that enable readers to detect the narrator's unreliability: (1) contradictions within the narrator's story; (2) the inconsistencies between his utterances and actions; (3) contradictions between the events he represents and the interpretations he makes based on these events; (4) overemphasis on the speaker or the addressee to shift the focus from the truth to the person conveying it or the person to whom it is directed, and thus psychologically manipulate them to believe whatever it is questionable; (5) indicators of the narrator's emotional instability, such as incomplete sentences, hesitations, repetitions, etc.; (6) emotionally loaded words, such as evaluative adjectives and expressive intensifiers; (7) contradiction resulting from presenting a multiplicity of viewpoints regarding the same events; (8) personal indicators of unreliability including memory gaps and limited knowledge; (9) paratextual signals including prefaces, dedications, chapter titles, etc. (adapted from Nünning 1997, 96-7).

Monika Fludernik identifies three types of narration unreliability: “factual inaccuracy” where the narrator lies intentionally, or unintentionally due to the inaccurate information he has been provided with; “lack of objectivity” due knowledge limitation or personal biases; “ideological unreliability” based on differences between the narrator's actions and the reader's world-view (qtd. in Olson 2003, 100). However, a narrator

cannot be either reliable or unreliable. According to James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin, “narrators exist along wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability” (1999, 96). Based on this, Olson observes that a narrator may change from being reliable to unreliable and vice versa throughout the course of the novel (2003, 100).

What follows is that Julian J. Schlöder considers all narrators to be unreliable (2022, 68). This does not necessarily mean that the narrator is lying. Rather, and to put it in Booth’s words, he is just “being potentially deceptive” (1983, 159). Schlöder argues that any narration that includes a form of omission, misinterpretation or presenting false information should be a place for suspicion (2022, 67). In this sense, when this claim is extended to historiographic metafiction, as it views history as depending on “narrative emplotments of past events” (Hutcheon 1988, 92), it is argued that any narrative that claims to present historical facts becomes a site of suspicion, and can therefore be regarded as unreliable. This unreliability does not stem from inaccuracy, but because historical narratives are always shaped through narrative choices that frame and give meaning to the past.

By presenting unreliable narrators in the process of commenting on historical events, historiographic metafiction intends to highlight the textuality of history. It suggests that writing history is no different from writing novels in that they both depend on choosing which events to narrate and which to omit, arranging the fragments of these events into a coherent story, filling the gaps these fragments leave incomplete, and they both depend on the author’s bias, culture, and time period. By doing so, historiographic metafiction emphasizes the unreliability of historical records and questions their authenticity.

2.Authenticity in Historiographic Metafiction

Authenticity is defined as “a process of verifying whether (or the extent to which) entities are what they are purported to be” (Newman and Smith 2016, 610). In historical contexts, authenticity is often associated with being accurate: if a work is authentic, it has an accurate representation of the era it represents. Matías Martínez believes that a fictional work is only considered historically authentic if it refers “to specific historical persons, events, or locations.” He claims that authenticity in fiction “depends on the degree to which particular parts of its storyworld can be identified with particular counterparts in reality” (2020, 524).

However, Sian Beavers and Sylvia Warnecke distinguish between historical accuracy which refers to “the objective, agreed-upon facts of



the past” and historical authenticity which refers to the “subjective: an opinion, perception or ‘a sense of the genuine’” (2021, 75). In that sense, Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger note that historical authenticity is “more concerned with creating a ‘feel’ and ‘experience’ than with strict factual fidelity” (qtd. in Cooper 2021, 161). Andrew B. R. Elliott, drawing on the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, argues that a historical text need not conform to historical accuracy so much as to “what audiences think the period looked like” (qtd. in Young 2021, 29). Something is considered authentic when it “cognitively fits,” when it conforms to the audience’s expectations of a given time, place, and culture, regardless of whether it accurately reflects historical reality (Cooper 2021, 162).

Historiographic metafiction views authenticity as familiarity rather than accuracy. That is, what audiences recognize as authentic in historical contexts is what they already believe or feel the past to have been like (Harrison 2021, 44). Consequently, historiographic metafiction may include inaccurate events, yet they feel authentic because they give a feeling of the era they represent. Similarly, the characters in historiographic metafiction, though fictional, may offer an authentic portrayal of the people of that time.

In his *Faking Literature*, K. K. Ruthven identifies techniques that make fictional texts feel authentic even when they are not accurate, creating what he terms as “authenticity-effects.” For him, authenticity is achieved through the inclusion of irrelevant, dense details and unimportant events that do not serve the whole plot. These are used to make the story look more realistic as they are usually “associated with factual reportage.” The authenticity-effect is also achieved through presenting a novel in the form of autobiography or as an edited or translated version of “a ‘discovered’ document” (2004, 149-51).

William Riggan identifies a problem with the novels that present themselves as autobiographies. For one reason, the autobiographer is subject to human limitations. He is unable to recall everything regarding the events that happen in his life and the people he meets throughout his life. Another reason lies in the fact that the actions he narrates concerning other people are subject to be misinterpreted. According to Riggan, such narrator does not have access to other characters’ psyche. He may have clues about their feelings and intentions, yet all of these are only predictions and cannot be used as evidence of the narrator’s reliability (1981, 22-4). This makes the matter more complicated as to how to tell whether a fictional autobiographer, like Vonnegut’s Starbuck, is reliable or not.



3.Unreliable Narration in *Jailbird*

Choosing Starbuck as a narrator is not a random choice. Starbuck serves a very important goal in the novel. Being the son of immigrant parents, Starbuck is able to critique the American condition from an outsider perspective. In an interview, Vonnegut states that “[i]t’s a tremendous advantage to be on the edge [...] because you can make a better commentary than someone at the center could” (Allen and Smith 1988, 299). Not only out of culture, Starbuck is out of time as well. He tells his story through flashbacks distant from the time it took place. This gives him a wide view to see all the events clearly, as well as a distance “to comment on contemporary culture” (Allen 1991, 128) without being emotionally and psychologically affected by them. However, narrating his life story at the age of sixty-six gives him a temporal distance which makes it hard for him to remember everything as they occurred which puts him in a place of doubt.

Throughout the course of the novel, readers are exposed to Starbuck’s frequent lies: he gives the policeman who has arrested him a fake name (31); he lies to Cleveland Lawes about the reason behind the clapping (81); and he admits that he frequently lies about his family’s business and origin (95). He even admits that he has never been “a serious man” and that his life is an “unbroken chain of proofs” of that fact (171). Thus, he deliberately invites readers to question the reliability of his narrative.

In applying Ansgar Nünning’s model of narrative unreliability, readers can easily identify places of unreliability throughout the novel. One the major identifiers of Starbuck’s unreliability is the numerous contradictions within his narrative. From the beginning of the novel, Starbuck laments his fate as a miserable and lonely man in this cruel world: “There would be no one to greet me at the gate. Nowhere in the world was there anyone who had a forgiving hug for me—or a free meal or a bed for a night or two” (2). Yet, as the story progresses, one gets to know that his girlfriend, Sarah Wyatt, has abandoned him and married his friend, Leland Clewes. Also, his only son, Walter, is ashamed to acknowledge any relation with him that he has even “told several playmates in the neighborhood that he was an adopted child” (71). If this means anything, it means that even the closest people to him sees him as evil. This makes readers aware that whatever picture he draws about himself is not necessarily true.

Contradiction within Starbuck’s narration also stems from his contradictory stance towards sending his friend, Leland Clewes, to prison



and ruining his life. Throughout the novel, Starbuck keeps returning to that point in time when he mentions his friend's name as a communist which results in a two-year imprisonment. He keeps insisting on the fact that he has only done so “accidentally” (240). He even declares that Clewes “was never [his] best friend” and that his “friendship with Clewes was never deep” (44). However, his insistence on making his record clean from betrayal puts much emphasis on him as a suspect of that crime. Sending Clewes to prison is Starbuck's revenge on him for having “stolen” his girlfriend, Sarah Wyatt, from him (128). This is highlighted in the text when Starbuck clearly states that their friendship “ended when he took a girl away from me and married her” (44). The reason behind Starbuck's insistence on cleaning his record is that his reputation has also been affected by this crime. He is considered as a traitor by many for betraying his best friend. As a result, he lost his job and is being “handed [...] on from job to job, no one could now think of a vacant post anywhere” as if he “was being punished for what [he] had done to Leland Clewes” (73). Thus, he has to prove himself innocent to the public. By presenting contradictory statements, he unintentionally stresses his unreliability.

One of the novel's central themes is the impossibility of achieving the American dream. Throughout the novel, he dreams about a country in which wealth belongs to the public. He wishes that “common people everywhere would take control of the planet's wealth... The only person who would be excluded from such a friendly and merciful society would be one who took more wealth than he or she needed at any time” (13-4). However, he contradicts himself when at the end of the novel Mary Kathleen O'Looney dies and leaves a will that transfers the ownership of the company to the public. Instead of handing the will to the government to give the company's money to the Americans, he hides it away just to keep his comfortable job as a Vice President of the corporation for two years.

In fact, Starbuck is too selfish to work on benefitting anyone except himself. As a young man, he wishes to enter Harvard “to become a public servant” (3), to serve his country. However, he does nothing when he gets a job at the government as the President's special advisor on youth affairs. Even at tragic times such as the Kent State case, Starbuck takes no action. He claims that he spent the night before meeting the president “drafting and redrafting [his] suggestions as to what the President might say about the Kent State tragedy” (32). However, he remains silent and keeps his suggestions to himself. And to cast away any blame one may pin on him, he pretends that he “was never asked to speak” (32). He

keeps emphasizing his minor role in the White House, not only regarding the Kent State tragedy, but also in regard to the Watergate Scandal. He claims that he is no more than “a little mouse from the White House pantry” (37) and that he has nothing to do with whatever happens there. He does so to free himself from any charges that might be pressed on him.

These contradictions put him under the spotlight and invite readers to question his statements. Throughout the novel, Starbuck tries to create a good image of himself. He brags his Harvard education, his uprising in the house of the upper-class wealthy Alexander Hamilton McCone, his high-ranking job in the government, and his position as a vice-president in the world’s largest institution to show himself as a decent man. However, whenever a mention of his involvement in any criminal act is exposed he pictures himself as a pitiful person who has no power and no authority even on his own life. He insists that he is nothing but “a robot programmed to behave like a genuine aristocrat” (103), to do whatever he is asked to do. By doing so, he intends to win readers sympathy. Starbuck even addresses readers directly using phrases such as “Pay attention, please” (1) and “Listen to this” (172) to build a deep connection with them so they can trust him and believe whatever he tells them. However, this is the very thing, according to Nünning, that makes readers doubt his reliability.

Another indicator of narrative unreliability in *Jailbird* is Starbuck’s emotional instability. Throughout the novel, Starbuck is depicted as being traumatized by all past events that have shaped the way he views himself. Starbuck witnesses a series of tragic events that he could not accept, especially that they happen in a row. From being betrayed by his girlfriend and his best friend all at once, to losing all job opportunities that he may have, to the death of his beloved wife and his only son being ashamed of him, this has affected his mind in a way that he has lost the ability to present history as a coherent account. Driven by guilt, one can clearly notice that the events he narrated are not the true account of things, but rather how he wishes them to take place. He keeps revisiting the same events over and over again, making different excuses of why they happened this way just to ease his guilty mind. This makes him remember events in fragments rather seeing the whole scene. He keeps jumping from one event to the other. At the same time, these events are frequently interrupted by remembering some other events along the process of the narration.

This interruption does not only affect the events narrated, but also shapes the language he uses to narrate them. Starbuck frequently uses short



paragraphs instead of long ones. Some paragraphs even consist of a single phrase. This linguistic structure indicates a fear of saying too much. Because he keeps getting back to the time when he ruined his friend's life by mentioning his name, he becomes very cautious about whatever he says. Moreover, he refuses to say much because he does not want to get deeply involved in past memories as they trouble his heavy mind. Thus, short phrases denote that he always has something hidden and that whatever he says is incomplete.

4. Historical Authenticity in *Jailbird*

Although Starbuck's narration is unreliable, it is considered authentic because it mirrors the age it represents. Peter Freese considers *Jailbird* as Vonnegut's "most 'realistic' novel" (1999, 137), because it works as "a running commentary on twentieth-century history, and [Starbuck's] ups and downs are so closely related to major historical events." The novel, he insists, "reads like a history of the United States from the turn-of-the-century labor fights to the aftermath of Watergate" (1999, 144).

When Ruthven's concept of authenticity-effects is applied to the novel, *Jailbird* is viewed as authentic for two reasons. First of all, the novel takes the form of an autobiography which gives it a personal touch. Readers are more likely to acknowledge a fictional story to be authentic if it is narrated by a person who has experienced the events of the era presented in the story. Second, the novel is filled with dense details regarding historical events and personages. These make the novel more authentic because they resemble historical reports and documentaries.

Vonnegut highlights the racist nature of the American history through showing the mistreatment of the immigrants, the laborers, and black people which makes the novel feels more authentic as it represents the twentieth-century America. On the one hand, the mistreatment of the laborers is depicted through the Cuyahoga massacre. Although Vonnegut claims in the prologue that the massacre "is an invention," he goes on to suggest that it portrays larger incidents in American history proposing that it is "composed of bits taken from tales of many such riots in not such olden times" (xxi). Even when he is faced with the similarities between the massacre and the Kent State tragedy, especially that it is mentioned in the novel, he refuses to give any statement. The reason behind this is that he intends to make the incident representative of the broader historical context of that time. He even insists in the same interview that "my orchestration of the event was consistent with the way riots had gone in the late nineteenth century, and with the way they



continue to go” (Reilly and Vonnegut 1980, 21). According to Freese “1894 was a year of widespread labor unrest, which saw major strikes at the Pullman Palace Car Company and the Southern Railroad Company, large miners’ strikes and riots at Columbia, Ohio, and Connelville, Pennsylvania, and a tailors’ strike in New York City” (1999, 144). Therefore, it is impossible to include all those strikes in one story, so he decides to make an inventory massacre that combines bits from every incident.

On the other hand, Vonnegut presents the suffering of the immigrants in a racist country. Being immigrants, the Starbucks were forced by their employer, Alexander McCone, to change their last name from Stankiewicz to Starbuck, claiming that they “would be better received [if they] had an Anglo-Saxon name” (5). As a result, Starbuck has always felt ignorant by the American society which has only accepted him after changing his name. This has led to a “confusion in the boy about his identity” (Sumner 2011, 193) and makes him torn between his origins and his new identity that forces him to act in certain ways and follow rules that he sees irrational. This seems to haunt him throughout the novel as he acknowledges that they “had never been as significant in American history as we had sometimes thought we were” (131) because he feels that he has never been accepted by the American system.

In addition to the immigrants, in the novel black people suffer a great deal and are always received as being inferior to the white. At the beginning of the novel, Starbuck, being a member of the upper-class, asserts that he has never been around any black person. He has not even met or interacted with black people throughout his life. As a member of the American Army, he notices that “Every unit was all black or all white, except for the officers, who were usually white in any case” (19). This “all black or all white” stresses how the American system acts in a racist manner towards black people that they are not allowed to be near white people as if they carry some infectious disease. Moreover, black people are not allowed to be in a place of power that officers should be “white in any case.”

Vonnegut also attacks the racist America through the story of Cleveland Lawes, the black limousine chauffeur of The RAMJAC Corporation. Although he has been captured by the Chinese during the Korean War, he prefers settling in China rather than getting back to the racist America. As a child, Lawes witnesses the horrifying treatment of the black by the American government: “a cousin of Lawes had been burned alive by a mob, and his father had been dragged out of his house one night and horse whipped by the Ku Klux Klan, and he himself had been beat up



twice for trying to register to vote” (83-4). He draws a comparison between the nice Chinese who “liked him, ... went to some trouble for him” (84) and even believed that he is “worth negotiations at the highest diplomatic levels” (85) and the Americans who “wanted him back in order to punish him” (85).

The novel also works as a mirror that reflects the failure of the justice system in America. It centers around the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Their story demonstrates how the justice system punishes individuals based on ideology rather than factual guilt. Their injustice begins when they become suspected without any evidence just because they are immigrants. Even Judge Thayer, “one of the three wise men” (179), believes that they should be punished even if they “may not have actually committed the crime” just because they are “enem[ies] of our existing institutions” (177-8). He even brags his actions as if they were some kind of heroic act against their “enemy” telling his friend with much pride “DID YOU SEE WHAT I DID TO THOSE ANARCHIST BASTARDS THE OTHER DAY?” (181). Even a gangster like Al Capone supports their sentence, believing that “they were enemies of the American way of thinking about America” and that they should be executed for being “ungrateful to America” (178) just because they have been defending their rights and supporting their co-workers in their misery.

Vonnegut emphasizes how injustice is acknowledged too late. This idea is intensified by Vanzetti’s final speech upon his execution “Never in our full life [...] could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man’s understanding of man, as now we do by accident” (179) which is ironic since their entire lives, and all the effort they have put on labor rights, have never earned them as much impact as their death does. They accomplish more “by accident” than through a lifetime of activism. Through the cruelty of their state, they contribute more for the cause of justice and tolerance than they have ever managed while alive, which eventually turns them into symbols.

Sacco and Vanzetti are only two examples of how justice is mischarged. Of course history includes other examples of justice miscarriages, yet past records cannot cover all of them. Thus, the novel stresses how such records use major figures as representatives of the era in which they lived. Therefore, Sacco and Vanzetti become representatives of the immigrant laborers of the twentieth-century America. However, this generalization does not question the novel’s authenticity. Rather, it supports it as it shows how individuals were categorized into groups and exposes how individuals were judged based on labels rather than personal deeds.

The Sacco and Vanzetti case serves another purpose in the novel. Starbuck relates their case to his and Clewes'. On the one hand, it demonstrates how justice systems use the weakest and most replaceable individuals, those who will not be missed, to assign guilt to them. Upon his arrest, Starbuck admits that he is “the oldest and least celebrated of all the Watergate coconspirators. What made me so uninteresting, I suppose, was that I had had so little power and wealth to lose. Other coconspirators had taken belly-whoppers from the tops of church steeples, so to speak” (30). Later, readers get to know that Starbuck's name is not even on the list of the Watergate conspirators. Even Arpad Leen, who “not only knew [the conspirators'] names: He knew many of them well”, exclaims that he has “never heard the name Starbuck associated with Watergate before” (209). Thus, one concludes that his crime has nothing to do with the scandal; rather, he is used as a scapegoat to cover up the names of prominent figures. For this reason, Starbuck's punishment shows “the ambiguity of ethical decisions in the complexities of twentieth-century politics” (Allen 1991, 134).

On the other hand, Starbuck's friend, Leland Clewes, is also punished without any serious crime. The novel pictures him as being “ruined by [Starbuck's] testimony” (44). According to Starbuck's narration, Clewes' name was mentioned as being among the “communists during the Great Depression,” even though Clewes himself asserts that he has never been one (45). People who have known Clewes also confirm this, but the court never listens. Instead of questioning Starbuck's testimony, the court assigns “six counts of perjury” (46) to Clewes. As a result, Starbuck receives a government job, whereas Clewes' life is ruined. His sentence also benefits Richard Nixon as he becomes “a national figure as the discoverer and hounder of the mendacious Leland Clewes” (47) which helps him become the president of the United States. This incident is really important to the story as it indicates how individuals are used as scapegoats by those in power to climb further up the ladder.

Jailbird criticizes the education system in America through the constant references to Harvard university. In the prologue, Vonnegut announces that “Harvard is all through this book” (xi) which emphasizes the importance of this institution to the novel as a representative of the whole education system. Starbuck's mentor, Alexander McCone, has romanticized Harvard that “he believed that Harvard professors were the wisest men in the history of the world. America could be paradise, if only all high posts in government were filled by Harvard men” (5-6). He insists on sending Walter to that university persuading his parents by saying that “You are going to find yourselves the proud parents of a



perfect Harvard gentleman someday” (5). For that reason, he has pressured Walter’s family into “chang[ing] [their] family name from Stankiewicz to Starbuck” pretending that Walter “would be better received at Harvard” if he “had an Anglo-Saxon name” (5). Walter, following Alexander McCone’s lead, has always romanticizes Harvard that he “was willing to spend his childhood and youth so unnaturally for this reason: Alexander Hamilton McCone promised to send him to Harvard someday” (xxxviii).

As a historiographic metafiction, *Jailbird* does not provide one dimension of the scene. There is always another frame to capture the scene within. Vonnegut does not place Harvard in this novel to praise it, but rather to attack the education system in America. Through Starbuck, Vonnegut shows the hypocrisy that surrounds educational institutions. The novel shows Harvard graduates to be well-educated, yet Starbuck confesses that he only “pretended” to read (154), highlighting how such institutions force individuals to create a fake identity to fit into their image. Moreover, the novel depicts how these institutions create corrupt people rather than intellectual decent ones. At the beginning of the novel, Starbuck wishes to go to university in order to be a public servant. However, when he has finally graduated and received a government role, he never does anything to serve the nation. This is emphasised through his passive role regarding the Kent State tragedy, even though he is the President’s special advisor on youth affairs. As he writes the novel, and after acquiring much wisdom and experience in life, he realizes that being a Harvard graduate does not make him any special. He laments “Was I shown no special respect in prison as a Harvard man? It was no distinction, actually. I had met or heard of at least seven others” (3).

Moreover, Starbuck highlights the pressure that being a graduate from Harvard puts on him. Being a Harvard man, everyone expects him to be successful and manage his life well. Yet, he fails as a husband and a father. By the time he was sixty-six, he looks back at his life noticing all the disasters he has made to the ones he truly loves—his family. He cries “Hooray for a Harvard education! Oh, to be the proud son of a Harvard man!” (18). He feels that he has not only disappointed his family, but the place which has given him the degree (and the respect) he has. He is not the only example that shows Harvard men as useless, parasites who feed on others. Radford Wyatt, Sarah’s father, who is a Harvard man “too,” also depends on his wife for providing for the family. Starbuck feels relieved realizing that he is “not the first Harvard man who had to be supported by his wife. Peace” (108).

Vonnegut also criticizes the economic system in America for being “a thoughtless weather system” that does not care about “the joys and tragedies of human beings” (231). Throughout *Jailbird*, Vonnegut attacks capitalism, showing its terrifying effects on American citizens. His critique is reflected through presenting an alternative version of an opposite economic system: communism. On the one hand, capitalism is depicted as a storm that destroys everything in its path. The Cuyahoga Massacre, for instance, is the result of a capital system which cares only about profit, even if it is accompanied by destroying people’s lives and causing deaths. Although the owners of the Cuyahoga Bridge and Iron Company promise to spoil their workers with high wages and occasional vacations and even declare that the company would eventually “become the property of the workers,” they break their promise as soon as an economic downturn hits the company: “Many workers were let go, and those who were kept on had their pay cut by 50 percent” (xvii). Even when the workers go on a peaceful strike, they are met with a military attack that results in the deaths of many strikers. Daniel McCone, the founder of the company, looking at the empty streets as the massacre has been over, tells his sons “Like it or not, boys, that’s the sort of business you’re in” (xxxvii). He has not even felt sorry nor showed any guilt towards the dead workers. He happily announces “that honor had been served and that justice had been done. Law and order had been restored” (xxxvii).

In parallel with the historical Cuyahoga Massacre, a modern American corporate power in the novel is presented through The RAMJAC Corporation. However, Vonnegut uses it to achieve a different aim. RAMJAC portrays how capital systems centralize power in the hand of few individuals. In *Jailbird*, RAMJAC owns “19 percent of ... everything in the country” which makes it the “largest conglomerate in the Free World” (230). Similar to Daniel McCone, Mary Kathleen, the owner of The RAMJAC Corporation, claims to work for “rescuing the people of the United States from their economy” (159), yet all she does is to expand her company into other areas and take over other companies. Starbuck notices that “Mary Kathleen O’Looney wasn’t the only shopping-bag lady in the United States of America. There were tens of thousands of them in major cities throughout the country” (140). She only wishes to achieve her goal of a better life for the poor after her death that she will finally “leave The RAMJAC Corporation to its rightful owners, the American people” (219). But even after her death, the government fails to make her wish true because “the federal government was wholly unprepared to operate all the businesses of RAMJAC on behalf of the



people. ... Most of those businesses, rigged only to make profits, were as indifferent to the needs of the people” (231).

Mary Kathleen O’Looney pretends to be a hater of capitalism because both her parents died at work. Her mother is one of the fifty women who lost their lives to Radium poisoning at the Wyatt Clock Company. The company offered these women some pin money in exchange for painting watch hands with radioactive radium white paint, which led to “their bones crumbling [and] their heads rotting off” and finally to their death (101). Her father, too, is a victim of capitalism as he lost his eyesight drinking wood alcohol while working as a night watchman in a shoe-polish factory. Yet, the reader learns at the end of the novel that she runs the largest capital corporations in the United States, RAMJAC. The novel reveals the hypocrisy of capitalism, which pretends to benefit people, but in reality, it only makes them suffer.

Unlike capitalism, communism is depicted as an idealist system which spreads equality among citizens. As a Harvard student, Starbuck sees in communism an opportunity to create a utopia out of this planet, but as he grows older he becomes “a cautious believer in capitalistic democracy” (13) because he realizes that communism is impractical and cannot be achieved in a corrupt system that supports quick money. This idea is reinforced by Dr. Carlo di Sanza who becomes a millionaire twice and sees communism as a thread that stops people like him from acquiring quick fortune. He tells Starbuck once that it is foolishness to support communism as “There are no opportunities in a communist country” (50). For this reason, capitalist governments see communism as a thread and whenever someone is proved to be a communist he is punished severely, just like what happens with Leland Clewes. This case is also evident in the US government’s reaction against the labor movement. On the one hand, Sacco and Vanzetti are faced with death for trying to stop the brutality of capitalism. On the other hand, the workers of the Cuyahoga Bridge and Iron Company are shot to death for defending their rights of having a decent job and a good salary that can feed their families.

5. Conclusion

Vonnegut’s *Jailbird* exemplifies historiographic metafiction’s tension between historical knowledge and fictional narratives. It foregrounds how history passes down past information through a process identical to fiction writing. To achieve this goal, the novel introduces an unreliable narrator who narrates a story happening in the middle of major historical events, making the reader confused what to consider as fact and what to

see as fiction. This article has applied Ansgar Nünning's model to list instances where Starbuck is proven to be unreliable. It shows that Starbuck's unreliability stems from the contradictions between what he says and what he does and the contradictions within his own narrative. It also highlights how Starbuck's mental state adds to his unreliability as he keeps jumping from one event to the other without finishing recalling the events he tries to recount. His hesitation, fragmentation and digression in regard to revealing the events of the story he narrates makes him subject to being judged as unreliable.

However, the present article argues that this unreliability is a privilege in Starbuck's case. Vonnegut utilizes it to achieve historiographic metafiction's aim that is to reveal that history is never neutral. History, in historiographic metafiction's eyes, is not the same as the past. It is the product of its historians who only select the events they think important, arrange them in a way that supports their argument, and omit whatever does not serve their purposes. So, history in that sense does not provide the whole scene. Yet, it represents the past in one way or another since it is the only way to access the past. In that regard, *Jailbird* may not be reliable in narrating the past, but it is authentic as it gives the reader a portrait of the era it represents. Although *Jailbird*'s version of that era is fragmented, unreliable, and incomplete, it serves an important purpose: writing history by an outsider, marginalized, traumatized and politically helpless to give an alternative version of events.

This article suggests that writing history by the marginalized and people who are considered as unimportant by the political, social and cultural systems provides a lens through which one can see a part of history that has been omitted by people in a place of power. Thus, this study is crucial for understanding how history is constructed rather than found. It also helps placing *Jailbird* among the larger Vonnegutian studies regarding the tension between history and fiction as it proves how historiographic metafiction captures history more than documentaries, making the novel more authentic than many documented histories.

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“I only told the truth”: Unreliable Narration and the Question of Historical Authenticity in *Jailbird*



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