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Major Themes in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

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BY

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KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree, but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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NOT TO LAUGH AT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
IS TO SHOOT YOURSELF.

--ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has written six novels which explore some of the most important problems confronting man in contemporary society. Little significant criticism has been written on Kurt Vonnegut since he began writing in 1949. Recently, however, he has experienced an increasing popularity with readers and critics who have found his novels successful probings into modern man's feelings of alienation in a world which he perceives as increasingly absurd. This thesis is an analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's use of black humor, satire and science fiction devices in his exploration of four major themes occurring throughout his novels: criticisms of science, religion, society and war.

CHAPTER II

KURT VONNEGUT, JR. AS A BLACK HUMORIST

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has been writing short stories, novels and articles since 1949. For many years he has been an "underground" literary success whose books were read mostly by young people, but recently Vonnegut has experienced increasing recognition by literary critics who did not consider him a serious writer a few years ago. Until the publication of Cat's Cradle (1963) and Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) most of Vonnegut's books could be found in the science-fiction section of paperback bookstores, along with works by Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke among others; or they could not be found at all because they were out of print. Within the last few years it has come to the attention of critics and other readers that Kurt Vonnegut is a writer whose six novels and numerous short stories carry messages of social criticism which can hardly be ignored. Now his books are found in college bookstores, in libraries, on class reading lists, and in the hands of readers who would previously have relegated Vonnegut to perpetual anonymity with other "sci-fi" or pulp fiction writers. "It is significant . . . that finally Vonnegut is getting the recognition he has long merited--the cover of The New York Times Book Review and the lead in Time's book section. Though Graham Greene some years ago called him 'one of the best living American writers,' it is a sad commentary on the harshness of the American cultural climate that such a

first-class novelist should so long be ignored."[1]

Though Kurt Vonnegut is primarily a social critic and a satirist of a new breed, it is evident from reading early reviews of his work that many literary analysts have not fully understood his novels or have missed the points he was making. Michael Crichton has written in the New Republic, "he writes about the most excruciatingly painful things. His novels have attacked our deepest fears of automation and the bomb, our deepest political guilts, our fiercest hatreds and loves. Nobody else writes books on these subjects; they are inaccessible to normal novelistic approaches."[2]

Perhaps Vonnegut's unusual approaches to the problems he sees in modern society have been responsible for the critics' cursory perusal of his early novels. For example, when Player Piano, Vonnegut's first novel, was published in 1952, it was unfavorably compared to Huxley's successful Brave New World, and Vonnegut was dismissed as a writer who was attempting to revive the well-worn man vs. machine theme without having anything new to say about it. One reviewer in a 1952 issue of New Republic acidly remarked that "Player Piano [has] stereotyped or amorphous characters, inept construction, blunderbuss satire, and pedestrian prose. . . . These defects, however serious, might be pardoned in a novel of ideas if the ideas themselves were profound or at

[1]Peter Rowley, "So It Goes," rev. of Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., The Nation, June 9, 1969, p. 737.

[2]J. Michael Crichton, "Sci-fi and Vonnegut," New Republic, April 26, 1969, p. 35.

least provocative. Mr. Vonnegut's are not. . . ."[3]

Though Player Piano, along with his five other novels, has been evaluated with more favor and understanding recently, Vonnegut's literary reputation in the 1950's was not enhanced by some of the short stories he wrote for magazines like Saturday Evening Post, Better Homes and Gardens, and Cosmopolitan. In the preface to Welcome to the Monkey House, Vonnegut explains that this collection of short stories includes samples of his "so-called 'slick fiction'" which he claims he sold "in order to finance the writing of the novels."[4]

As a writer, Vonnegut's career has been somewhat sporadic. He admits that he is self-taught and that he has no theories about writing that would help others.[5] It is evident even from a superficial knowledge of his background that most of the themes of his novels are the result of personal experience.

His studies in biochemistry at Cornell and Carnegie Institute of Technology were interrupted by World War II, during which he was sent to Germany. He was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge and assigned to Dresden with a prisoner-of-war work group. "The Allied High Command decided, for no apparent strategic reason, to annihilate the 'open' city, and on February 13, 1945, three waves of British and American bombers saturated Dresden with high explosives followed by

[3]David Goldknopf, "The Mechanistic Blues," New Republic, Aug. 18, 1952, p. 19.

[4]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Welcome to the Monkey House (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. x.

[5]Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. ix.

hundreds of thousands of incendiaries, creating a holocaustic fire storm and effecting the largest massacre in human history, with more victims than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined."[6] The shocking experience in Dresden was to provide Vonnegut with a subject for Slaughterhouse-Five, his most recent novel, as well as to give him material for criticizing war and the uses to which science is put.

After the war, Vonnegut majored in Anthropology at the University of Chicago for two years, but he did not graduate. While he studied, he worked for the Chicago City News Bureau as a police reporter; the first story he phoned in reveals Vonnegut's penchant for translating the horrifying absurdities of modern existence into a dark comedy which can evoke laughter at even the most gruesome death. The story "was about a young veteran who had taken a job running an old-fashioned elevator in an office building. The elevator door on the first floor was ornamental iron lace. Iron ivy snaked in and out of the holes. There was an iron twig with two iron lovebirds perched upon it. This veteran decided to take his car into the basement and he closed the door and started down, but his wedding ring was caught in all the ornaments. So he was hoisted into the air and the floor of the car went down, dropped out from under him, and the top of the car squashed him. So it goes."[7]

Among other things, Vonnegut has been the first Saab car dealer in the United States, a volunteer fireman, and the designer of a sculpture

[6]Anon., "Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.," Current Biography, 1970 (New York: H. H. Wilson Co., 1970), p. 429.

[7]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969), p. 8.

for a motel near the Boston airport. The decision to devote all of his time to writing was hastened by a particularly distasteful job which Vonnegut held until 1950 with General Electric in Schenectady, New York. He was a public relations man, and it is evident that he enjoyed being a PR man about as much as he liked being in World War II. In several novels, especially Player Piano, Schenectady becomes Ilium, New York, a mythical locale suffering from all the ills of a modern overindustrialized city. In Ilium the advancements of technology and industry have made the human being practically obsolete. In The Sirens of Titan Vonnegut makes his disapproval of the military-industrial morass more explicit: on the planet Mars attempts were made to keep people obedient and subordinate by cleaning out their memories. But as Vonnegut shows, this process was somewhat ineffective. "The poor people who had that done to them couldn't walk, couldn't talk, couldn't do anything. The only thing anybody could think of to do with them was to house-break them, teach them a basic vocabulary of a thousand words, and give them jobs in military or industrial public relations."[8]

At the present time Vonnegut claims to be "commiting suicide by cigarette"[9] while continuing to explore (through his writings) the absurdities of life and the inevitability of death. In a recent interview Vonnegut explained, in a grandly evasive manner, what he is doing: "I have a strong feeling that I am a robot. I am totally following a program and we all are. I don't know how people explain the imagina-

[8]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., The Sirens of Titan (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 127.

[9]Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. x.

tion, anyway. My books are protests against explanations. It drives me nuts when someone tells me what's going on."[10]

For most of his career, critics have been uncertain as to how Vonnegut's work should be classified, and they have not come to terms with his style or his subject matter. In the beginning, science fiction seemed the most logical category, though Vonnegut never liked that classification, as his sarcastic remarks show: "I objected to this label because I thought it was narrowing my readership. People regard science-fiction writers as interchangeable with comic-strip writers."[11] On one occasion Vonnegut reports that a college professor, "climbing down into his Mercedes-Benz 300 SL gran turismo, assured me that public relations men and slick writers were equally vile, in that they both buggered truth for money. I asked him what the very lowest grade of fiction was, and he told me 'Science fiction.'"[12] Of course Vonnegut is able to laugh equally at his readers, the college professor, and the critics who like to call him a science-fiction writer, because none of them seem to perceive what the basic difference is between Vonnegut's novels and science fiction. While he does use certain devices appropriate to the science-fiction writer such as time-travel, inter-planetary communication, social mechanization, and automation, "Vonnegut's purposes are very different: he is nearly always talking about the

[10]Richard Todd, "The Masks of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." New York Times Magazine, Jan. 24, 1971, p. 26.

[11]C.D.B. Bryan, "Kurt Vonnegut, Head Bokononist," N.Y. Times Book Review, April 6, 1969, p. 2.

[12]Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. x.

past, not the future."[13]

In order to write about the past, and about the modern world which he perceives as teetering on the verge of madness, Vonnegut has to use something other than traditional styles of the novel or traditional satiric methods. Time-warps and other elements of the science-fiction novel are used because they enable Vonnegut to achieve a detachment from the rather disturbing and painful things he is exploring in his novels. Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of Vonnegut's attitude toward science fiction is found in his treatment of Kilgore Trout, a character who appears in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and in Slaughter-house-Five and functions partially as Vonnegut's alter-ego.

Kilgore Trout is Eliot Rosewater's favorite science-fiction writer but his books are only to be found in the most disreputable pornography bookstores, and his only income is the result of his job as a stock clerk in a trading stamp center. Obviously Vonnegut is making a wry comment about his own erstwhile stature as a literary figure when his books were as little regarded as Kilgore Trout's. At one point in the novel Eliot Rosewater crashes a convention of science-fiction writers and tells them that although it doesn't matter that they cannot write for sour apples, they are "all I read anymore. You're the only ones who'll talk about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage. . . . You're the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us,

[13]Crichton, p. 35.

what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us."[14]

When Vonnegut was finally elevated from the dubious literary genre of science fiction and recognized as a serious writer more worthy of critical attention, he remarked, with a large dose of irony, "It's higher class. It pays more. After all, I'm supporting a family."[15]

Some critics began to see Vonnegut as a satirist, especially after the 1963 publication of Cat's Cradle, a novel which is blatantly anti-war and which attacks scientific irresponsibility. Critics then realized that he was satirizing an overly-mechanized society in Player Piano, questioning the values of war in Mother Night, and examining man's purpose on earth in The Sirens of Titan, but Vonnegut did not like the satirist label either. In an interview, he was asked about his work as a satirist, and his reply is a perfect example of his ability to mix a "put on" with satire, ridicule and humor. "People ask me to define 'satire' and, you know? I've never even bothered to look it up. I wouldn't know whether I'm a satirist or not. One thing about being a chemistry major at Cornell, I've never worried about questions like that. It was never important for me to know whether I was one or not."[16]

Unlike Swift, Twain, H. L. Mencken, and Philip Roth, to name a few

[14]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 18.

[15]Rollene W. Saal, "Pick of the Paperbacks," Saturday Review, March 28, 1970, p. 34.

[16]Bryan, p. 2.

well-known satirists, Kurt Vonnegut cannot be defined primarily as a satiric writer because his work goes beyond the bounds of what is traditionally thought of as satiric writing. Leonard Feinberg, in Introduction to Satire, explains that "like other arts, the best satire is concerned with the nature of reality. Unlike other arts, which emphasize what is real, satire emphasizes what seems to be real but is not."[17] If Feinberg's definition is accepted, Vonnegut does not quite fit the label "satirist" because in his novels he does emphasize what is real. Though some of what he sees of reality is thought to be distorted by traditional standards, Vonnegut's distortions are simply mirroring a distorted reality. In other words, it is not Vonnegut who is being a satirist by using a "playfully critical distortion of the familiar."[18] The familiar is already distorted, and it is this aspect of reality which Vonnegut writes about. If he is to be thought of as a satirist at all, it should be in keeping with the satirist's reliance on a social norm. As Leonard Feinberg explains it,

> Of course satire relies on norms. The moment one criticizes and says that something has been done in the wrong way, he is implying that there is a right way to do it. The 'right' way has been interpreted by some to mean the moral way, but that is only one of the possible criteria. In actual practice, satirists usually apply a standard not of morality but of appropriateness--in other words, a social norm. It is a norm concerned not with ethics but with customs, not with morals but with mores; and it may be accepted by an entire society or only one class in that society, or just a small coterie."[19]

[17] Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 3.

[18] Feinberg, p. 19.

[19] Ibid., p. 11.

In a satiric work, the author's purpose is plain to the reader; it is obvious that corrective measures are offered as positive solutions for returning to certain norms and standards accepted by society. Vonnegut may satirize, that is, "poke fun" at the things he does not like about modern life and hope for improvements to be made, but to him, it is the accepted standards and norms which need to be corrected, not their exaggerated faults. One of the problems of satire is that to many humorists, Vonnegut included, "the world itself is a large balloon full of wind, a satire on itself;"[20] the cosmos is seen as meaningless or as some kind of cruel joke to which the only response is a kind of humanizing laughter. To satirize a world which is already viewed as an absurd creation, would imply that there is some assumption of moral certainty behind all the questioning of values; in Vonnegut's work this assumption is not found.

Perhaps a better label for Kurt Vonnegut if one must be used, is "black humorist," a term which has been successfully applied to the rather mordant, sardonic humor exhibited in all six novels and in a majority of his short stories. "Black humor" has been used in the past as a kind of catch-all which includes works which do not quite fit into other established humorist modes, including satire, and it has eluded precise definition until recently, when critics realized that it had to be dealt with on something more than a superficial level.

Arriving at a precise definition of the term "black humor" has

[20] Anon., "American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter," Time, March 4, 1966, p. 47.

been a problem. In the preface to an anthology of works by American black humorists, Bruce Jay Friedman has tried to explain "black humor" but he admits that he "would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich."[21] Nevertheless, Friedman claims that black humor is about "that fading line between fantasy and reality . . ." about "a nervousness, a tempo, a near-hysterical new beat in the air, a punishing isolation and loneliness of a strange, frenzied new kind."[22]

There is material for a darkly humorous novel everywhere, everyday, no matter where one looks. The modern media has brought the world's grotesqueries into disturbing focus, and the public is continually reminded of the insanity of a world which has created mega-death bombs, which has little regard for overpopulation, which has practically automated itself to the point where one wonders, with Kurt Vonnegut, what people are for.

In the New York Times, Friedman suggests, can be found all the examples one needs to illustrate black humor: "A mid-flight heart-attack victim is removed from an airliner, suddenly slides from the stretcher and cracks her head on the runway. We bomb North Vietnam and nervously await the reaction of Red China, scourge of the Free World."[23] What is going on in the world is beyond the average man's power of reasoning; the daily newspaper is full of seemingly unexplainable events which can only be classified as absurd, since they defy one's sense of order and

[21] Bruce Jay Friedman, ed., Black Humor (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. viii.

[22] Friedman, p. viii.

[23] Ibid., p. ix.

sensibility in the world. In Friedman's words, "A new . . . chord of absurdity has been struck in the land . . . there is a new mutative style of behavior afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction."[24]

When Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. found himself wearing the "black humorist" label which Bruce Jay Friedman seems to have originated, he reacted by claiming that black humor is a phrase which critics have coined for their own convenience: "Out I go into the ashcan with Terry Southern and John Barth. But those people hated their parents. I liked mine. . . . Critics all come out of the English departments. They believe that in order for a person to be sensitive and creative he can't understand how a refrigerator works. I know how my refrigerator works."[25]

The black humorist's subject matter most frequently centers around man's most miserable and disturbing conditions such as war, disease, deformity, death, dehumanization, mechanization, social and scientific irresponsibility. But black humor, while it faces the existential idea of man's growing awareness of the absurdity in the world, does not react with despair and resignation; it makes life bearable by treating its absurdities as a joke. "The humor in Vonnegut's fiction is what enables us to contemplate the horror that he finds in contemporary existence. It does not disguise the awful things perceived; it merely strengthens and comforts us to the point where such perception is bearable. Comedy can look into depths where tragedy dares not acknowledge.

[24]Friedman, p. ix.

[25]Saal, p. 34.

The comic is the only mode which can allow itself to contemplate absurdity."[26]

Unlike "sick humor" which tends to be base, degenerate, and for the most part, intellectually tasteless, black humor can be cynical and skeptical about life without becoming hateful or revolting. "Probably the difference between black humor and sick humor is that one is an expression of dark rage at miserable conditions or values and the other is a perverse enjoyment of the same."[27] The Lenny Bruce kind of bitterness and resentment, the perverse dwelling on that which is considered "sick" or "abnormal" by everyday standards, has been supplanted by black humor, which allows contemplation of a disturbed world but does not revel in its grotesqueries.

Undoubtedly Kurt Vonnegut, whose tragic and funny novels express the black humorist's recognition that modern man has created an absurd world for himself, has provided a better definition of his own type of humor than anyone else: "What is black humor?" asks Mr. Vonnegut. "Nothing special, just Jewish humor, middle European humor. Freud calls it gallows humor and says that what it represents is an effort to express your humanity before you die. You want to know what black humor is? I'll give you an example. The guy who was taken to the electric chair in Cook County. As they were strapping him in, he

[26]Robert Scholes, "Slaughterhouse-Five," New York Times Book Review, April 6, 1969, pp. 1, 23.

[27]Jesse Bier, The Rise and Fall of American Humor (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1968), p. 294.

said, 'This will certainly teach me a lesson.'"[28]

Black humor is not just a modern literary fad. Even though the term itself has not been around much longer than 1965, black humor is part of a continuing literary tradition which has a comic appreciation of life at its center. Robert Scholes has traced the ancestors of black humor as far back as Aristophanes, continuing through the great picaresque and satiric works in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "In a historical perspective," Scholes comments, "Black Humor seems allied with those periodic waves of rationality which have rolled through Western culture with continually increasing vigor for over two thousand years."[29]

Though seeds of the modern concept of black humor are seen in the works of such writers as Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift and Voltaire, it is apparent that there is a great difference between Vonnegut's humor and the humor found in a work like A Modest Proposal, for example. Swift was hoping for an improvement in the political and economic relationship between England and Ireland, and for a return to common sense. The black humorist may, like Swift, make use of such devices as satire, ridicule, exaggeration, and irony, but his conception of reality is quite different from that of a pre-twentieth century writer. The modern world is seen to be too absurd to be bettered by a few correctives suggested by writers; thus the black humorist, in a playfully comic spirit,

[28]Bruce Cook, "When Kurt Vonnegut Talks--And He Does--The Young All Tune In," National Observer, Oct. 12, 1970, p. 21.

[29]Robert Scholes, "'Mithridates, He Died Old': Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The Hollins Critic, 3, No. 4 (1966), 2.

turns "the materials of satire and protest into comedy."[30] The twentieth century is so vastly different from previous centuries that it is no longer possible for some authors to see any clear paths to social improvement. Life has gone so far beyond the possibilities of offering a few simple suggestions for correcting its darker aspects, that we are forced to laugh at it, to see it as a joke, because its absurdities cannot be dealt with in a sensible, rational way.

Perhaps "black humor" can be more accurately explained as a type of satire necessitated by the events which have shaped the nuclear age. The life modern man has made for himself is absurd, and therefore any treatment of it must paradoxically include satire, yet it must also go beyond a satiric viewpoint. Though Vonnegut said, in 1969, "I find the label mystifying,"[31] evidently he became aware that the black humorist, unlike the satirist, often finds that nothing in life is worth preserving and no cause is worth risking one's life, because he wrote later: "Black humorist's holy wanderers find nothing but junk and lies and idiocy wherever they go. A chewing-gum wrapper or a used condom is often the best they can do for a Holy Grail."[32]

Laughter has always been a refuge from philosophical doubt and moral uncertainty concerning man's fate; even Friedrich Nietzsche, whose own questioning led him to adopt a nihilistic view of life, admitted that humor has a value which transcends even the most ingrained skep-

[30] Scholes, p. 3.

[31] Bryan, p. 2.

[32] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Why They Read Hesse," Horizon, 12 (Sept. 1970), p. 29.

ticism. "Perhaps," Nietzsche wrote in Beyond Good and Evil, "though nothing else of the present may have a future, our laughter itself may have a future."[33]

In the American literary tradition laughter in the form of black humor has had a discernible role from the Puritan era, through Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, through the "American Renaissance" of Melville and Hawthorne, and finally to Mark Twain, who is perhaps the single American humorist-author who successfully combines satire and black humor and maintains his perspective on life. Twain, more than any other American writer before the twentieth century, recognized the power of laughter as a weapon against which there can be no argument. In "The Mysterious Stranger" he remarked, "Your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon--laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution--these can lift at a colossal humbug--push it a little--weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."[34]

Abundant illustrations of Twain's black humor can be found, especially in his later writings which exhibit a more generalized irreverence for America's "sacred cows." In a letter to William Dean Howells, for example, Twain remarked that while Poe's prose is "unreadable," Jane Austin's [sic] is "entirely impossible. It seems a great pity

[33]Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," The Philosophy of Nietzsche, Modern Library (New York: Random House, Inc., 1954), p. 526.

[34]Mark Twain, "The Mysterious Stranger," The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 736.

that they allowed her to die a natural death."[35]

The ancestors of black humor can also be found in the absurdist point of view espoused in existentialist literature. In order to understand the way in which Kurt Vonnegut's novels explore an absurd universe, it is necessary to explain more fully the absurd point of view and its relationship to the main ideas in Vonnegut. Richard Boyd Hauck, in his book A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction, points out the direct relationship between the philosophy in Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus and the development of the absurd in American humor. Hauck states, "To be fully conscious is to have a sense of the absurd. A sense of the absurd follows the recognition that the universe appears to be meaningless."[36] Like the mythological Sisyphus, man struggles endlessly to accomplish a futile task and to look for meaning within that struggle. However, the struggle itself is as absurd as the hope for ultimate meaning, because "this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world"[37] leads man to the discovery that his worst suspicions have been confirmed: instead of finding meaning as he intended, man finds non-meaning instead. Richard Boyd Hauck concludes that "this results in the sense of the distance between what man desires and what man can have.

[35]Mark Twain, "Letter to William Dean Howells," The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 785.

[36]Richard Boyd Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 3.

[37]Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 21.

The effect is the absurd point of view: 'To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason.'"[38]

Man wants to find meaning for existence because he suspects that there must be a logical explanation if only it could be found. This search for meaning is reasonable; the world in which man searches is not reasonable--hence, the absurd dilemma arises out of man's need for lucidity and the irrational denial of it to him. "The awareness of total absurdity--sees everything as absurd. This all-encompassing view is paradoxical: it sees that there is no norm, that everything deviates from a man's inner sense of rightness or his suspicion that there should be ultimate meaning. The man who has a sense of the absurdity of everything can shift his viewpoint at any time to see the impossible as probable and the normal as abnormal."[39]

In the modern world depicted in Kurt Vonnegut's novels the search for ultimate meaning has led to the founding of new religions, to space exploration, and to wild speculations about inter-galactic communication. Kurt Vonnegut has no illusions about what the astronauts have found, as he explains in The Sirens of Titan: "Those unhappy agents found what had already been found in abundance on Earth--a nightmare of meaninglessness without end. The bounties of space, of infinite outwardness, were three: empty houses, low comedy, and pointless death."[40] Man's quest for meaning thus is not properly located "out

[38]Hauck, p. 5.

[39]Ibid., p. 4.

[40]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 8.

there;" Vonnegut seems to suggest that in the exploration of the human soul is the beginning of wisdom, even though one may encounter some low comedy and pointless death there.

Once man is aware of the meaninglessness inherent in an absurd world, what possible course of action can give him the confidence that he can create meaning? In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus answers that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."[41] Is a permanent attitude of scorn the only solution, or does man simply experience one despairing thought after another until he reaches the nihilistic point of view? Camus' answer to these questions is that defiance is the absurd man's only truth; only through conscious action (activity of consciousness) can man create meaning in an absurd world.[42] "Out of defiance and determination comes the accomplishment of creating one's own meaning and one's own self. . . . What the man who is conscious of absurdity must do if he is not to commit suicide is to convince himself that an acceptance of what he must accept is an act of will. . . . The act of choosing to accept the fate and to scorn the gods who assigned the fate, is a self-created--and self-creating--absurdity that negates the crippling effects of the original absurdity."[43]

Vonnegut and other black humorists take Camus one step further by suggesting that while man may be scornful, resigned, or defiant in the face of life's rather dismal prognosis, an even better reaction is

[41]Camus, p. 90.

[42]Ibid., p. 47.

[43]Hauck, pp. 6-7.

laughter--knowing how to take a joke. Richard Boyd Hauck explains that "by creating his own meaning, Sisyphus has accomplished the supreme act of artistry; he has made something out of nothing. But Sisyphus's absurd act is life-affirming as well as ludicrous. It is, then, the highest kind of joke. . . . The American absurdist has consistently refused to take seriously the absurdity of everything without postulating at the same time that this absurdity is also hilarious. Although he well could be, he never is a tragedian; he nudges his reader towards laughter instead of despair."[44] Kurt Vonnegut, as a black humorist and as a modern American absurdist, acknowledges the absurd recognition that life ultimately means death, but unlike the existentialist views of Camus and Sartre which argue that the fact of death makes everything absurd, Vonnegut sees that man hastens his own absurdity by bringing it on himself. The tone of Vonnegut's work and his attitude toward life indicate that he is critical, satiric, and witty; he has not resigned himself to hopelessness.

For Vonnegut black humor seems to be a way of coming to terms with an unpleasant, illogical reality; life is a scheme of things in which man has no discernible purpose, no obvious reason for his own existence, so Vonnegut asks in his novels, "What are people for?" This question is not a new one; Erich Fromm has noted that it arises out of man's unique dilemma of finding out who he is and why he is here. Fromm says, "Reason, man's blessing, is also his curse . . . being aware of himself,

[44] Hauck, pp. 7, 9.

he realizes his own powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end: death. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his existence: he cannot rid himself of his own mind even if he should want to; he cannot rid himself of his body as long as he is alive--and his body makes him want to be alive. . . . Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape."[45]

There is no single answer given by Vonnegut to the question he poses, "What are people for?" because any response is capable of becoming an absurdity itself when it is applied to a multiplicity of situations in an absurd world. Max F. Schultz has explained this reluctance on Vonnegut's part to supply an answer to the problems of existence he is facing by calling his method one of "thematic pluralism." By this Schultz means that the black humorist is looking for a purpose in life in a contemporary society which has a fragmented view of what constitutes reality, therefore the black humorist is forced to look at life from more than just one thematic viewpoint, and as a result it is often difficult to ascertain the precise direction which Vonnegut is taking. As Schultz says, "In our century, particularly in the past two decades, the self as a verifiable, definable, even possible, entity has vanished in the ironic acceptance of a world without metaphysical center, one fragmented into multiple realities."[46] Vonnegut is aware of this frag-

[45]Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Pub. Inc., 1969), p. 30.

[46]Max F. Schultz, "The Unconfirmed Thesis: Kurt Vonnegut, Black Humor, and Contemporary Art," Critique, 12, No. 3 (1971), 15.

mentation and his novels are explorations into the realities of twentieth century man in that they try to posit some meaning for life behind the modern absurdities.

To Vonnegut there can be no absolutes in man's philosophy except for the fact of existence itself. Like other black humorists, Vonnegut places little faith in either man's past accomplishments or in his future progress. His novels do not appear to admit any faith in intrinsic ideas, nor do they offer any credence in man's ability to deal with the problems of his own existence. Ultimately, one might argue with Max Schultz that "these novelists write out of a philosophical sense of the indeterminate as being the only reality available to man today. . . . . Assent is withheld from otherwise tenable and normative intellectual positions, including outright dissent. This programmatic skepticism has become one of the strategies used by Black Humorists for evoking a discursive world of not one but multiple unverifiable possibilities."[47]

The black humorist's tendency not to adopt an identifiable, concrete philosophical approach to life is further carried out in Vonnegut by the unreliability of his characters, especially the protagonists of the six novels. When life becomes unbearable, when reality gets to be too oppressive, these characters retreat into a kind of schizophrenic fantasy world which helps them cope with immediate problems. Critics have had some difficulty determining the validity of a given character's social criticisms because of the suspicion that he may or may not be

[47]Schultz, pp. 24, 27.

insane. It is this calculated ambiguity in Vonnegut's novels which makes his stated purposes difficult to confirm. In the Preface to Welcome to the Monkey House, for example, Vonnegut explains that the two main themes of his novels were stated by his siblings: "Here I am cleaning shit off practically everything" and "No pain."[48]

These statements are typical of Vonnegut's clever duplicity and his tendency to use a "put on" to escape critical pigeon-holing. The critics who take everything Vonnegut has to say about his own writing in a literal sense have had the most difficulty attributing meaning to his work. The first statement may mean that, by clearing away some of the delusions one holds about life, an attempt can be made at establishing meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. The second theme, "no pain," could mean that through such things as black humor one can find a temporary relief from the suspicion that people are not here for any reason whatsoever. There is also relief from the awareness that life is an absurd joke which only ends in death. Richard Schickel has commented, "Over the years Vonnegut has advanced from diagnostician to exorcist, finding in intensified comic art the magic analgesic for temporary relief of existential pain."[49]

[48]Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. x.

[49]Richard Schickel, "Black Comedy With Purifying Laughter," Harper's, 232 (May 1966), 106.

CHAPTER III

SCIENCE: SCIENCE HAS NOW KNOWN SIN

Kurt Vonnegut believes that science has contributed much to the creation of an absurd modern world. Within the thousands of examples of scientific folly, mismanagement, and irresponsibility lies a wealth of black humor which Vonnegut examines. Science, of course, helped launch man into the industrial era, and with that important step came some good, as well as some disastrous results. Vonnegut is critical of science for its blind generosity in giving the world better and faster ways to run wars and deliver death when it has always pretended to be more concerned with saving lives than with destroying them. He also criticizes science for its part in making modern society a vast, unmanageable, technological nightmare in which people have little use except as consumers. Ultimately the greatest absurdity of science comes to light in the recognition of its utter failure to explain existence to mankind.

There was a time, in recent decades, when science was regarded as the most important subject one could study in school, because science, it was thought, held the keys to ultimate truth. People thought that all the important answers to life's mysteries could be revealed by technology, if only there were time and money enough to find them. A good example of this kind of thinking is evinced by a policeman in the novel Mother Night. He explains that it is chemicals which make people act the crazy way they do, which cause wars and behavioral changes and

facilitate social misbehavior. It is the policeman's contention that if certain chemicals could be studied they could provide a clue to man's irrational behavior. With science, he says, "everything's possible now, if they just work at it--get the money and get the smartest people and get to work. Have a crash program."[50] The policeman's glib acceptance of the myth that science has an answer if there is one to be found is what Vonnegut protests in his novels. With the recent acknowledgement that science is indeed fallible, some men have discovered that perhaps science does not have all the answers and cannot invariably provide mankind with a better life. Today the scientific world does not seem so sacred and it is open to skeptical questioning.

Kurt Vonnegut's novels leave no doubt that science is not as hallowed as it once was. Vonnegut's former optimism about "scientific truth" and his disillusionment about the irresponsibility of scientists is evident in nearly all his work. In an article for Vogue magazine Vonnegut explained his view of science. "I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist, maybe my brother, would have taken a color photograph of God Almighty--and sold it to Popular Mechanics magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us so happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima."[51]

[50]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Mother Night, Bard Edition. (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p. 172.

[51]Vonnegut, "Up's Better than Down," Vogue, Aug. 1, 1970, p. 144.

Two of Vonnegut's novels in particular, Player Piano and Cat's Cradle, explore his main criticisms about science and about what people do with the scientific knowledge that is given them. Four general statements which appear frequently in Vonnegut's novels can be made about his views of science.

1. Every new piece of scientific knowledge is [not] a good thing for humanity.[52]
2. It isn't knowledge that's making trouble, but the uses it's put to.[53]
3. Science is magic that works.[54]
4. People put too much blind faith in the miracles science can work.

In Player Piano Vonnegut's target is a modern overindustrialized society in which people have no real purpose or value. In an economy where machines do most of the work and much of the thinking, it becomes obvious once again that Vonnegut is asking the familiar question, "What are people for?" In Cat's Cradle Vonnegut shows that science has had its detrimental effects on the world through his satirization of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, a scientist who invents the deadly substance "ice-nine." It isn't that Vonnegut is against science. Instead, he is aware that man's scientific inventiveness and irresponsible gadgeteering have helped make the purpose of life questionable if not genuinely absurd. As a black humorist, Vonnegut does not give in to feelings of hopelessness and despair about the direction the world seems to be

[52]Vonnegut, Player Piano, Bard Edition. (New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 297.

[53]Ibid., p. 93.

[54]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 147.

taking. His idea that some scientific discoveries can be regarded as black jokes on humanity pervades his novels. In Cat's Cradle, for example, the following discussion about the wonders of science takes place.

> 'How can anybody in his right mind be against science?' asked Crosby.
> 'I'd be dead now if it wasn't for penicillin,' said Hazel. 'And so would my mother.'
> 'How old is your mother?' I inquired.
> 'A hundred and six. Isn't that wonderful?'
> 'It certainly is,' I agreed.[55]

The point is, of course, that some of the good things people invent in scientific laboratories can be used for the wrong purposes, and this idea pervades both Cat's Cradle and Player Piano.

In Player Piano society has become obsessed with scientific invention to the point where men as individuals no longer count. The average citizen's sense of dignity and worth has been whittled down so that life becomes a boring sequence of purposeless days and nights. "In an increasingly mechanized and computerized society," explains Gerald Weales, "man will lose (or has lost) his usefulness to others and to himself; even those who stand to gain materially are only comfortable mirror images of the poor, in spirit and in fact, whom society rejects or coddles. Without vocation, man drowns in boredom or takes what comfort he can in greed or cruelty or self-indulgence or meaningless acts of rebellion."[56]

The society of Ilium, New York is sharply divided: if you pass the

[55]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 157.

[56]Gerald Weales, "Whatever Happened to Tugboat Annie?" Reporter, Dec. 1, 1966, p. 52.

I.Q. test you are eligible to become one of the elite engineers or managers; otherwise, "any man who cannot support himself by doing a job better than a machine"[57] is employed in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (the "Reeks and Wrecks") or he is given a twenty-five year stint in the Army. The Shah of Bratpuhr, spiritual leader of six million people, and a visiting dignitary who has come to the United States to learn what could be done for the good of his people, views the Reeks and Wrecks as "Takaru"--slaves, whose only jobs seem to be opening and closing fire hydrants. Despite the protests of the guide from the State Department that the workers are not slaves but citizens, the Shah persists in recognizing the situation for what it is: men have become the "Takarus" of machines.

"Know-how" and the search for "scientific truth" are valued in Player Piano; people are not. Vonnegut is critical of the kind of "progress" which creates a nightmarish world, but he does not conclude that people are not responsible for their own state of affairs or that they are always worth saving from a technological death. It is clear that most Americans are "thorough believers in mechanization . . . even when their lives [have] been badly damaged by mechanization."[58] The complaint of many people "wasn't that it was unjust to take jobs from men and give them to machines, but that the machines didn't do nearly as many human things as good designers could have made them do."[59] In

[57]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 27.

[58]Ibid., p. 241.

[59]Ibid.

Player Piano it seems that the engineers are as shallow, stupid and inane as the "Homesteaders" who live on the other side of the tracks. Though Vonnegut's satire of mechanization and technology is easily seen, his basic question, "What are people for?" is not answered without equivocation in this novel.

Paul Proteus, whose name suggests vascillation and changeability, is the protagonist of Player Piano. He is an engineer who wavers between thinking that machines have done wonders for society and questioning their ultimate value. In some ways Proteus is like Kurt Vonnegut: "He knew with all his heart that the human situation was a frightful botch, but it was such a logical, intelligently arrived-at botch that he couldn't see how history could possibly have led anywhere else."[60]

Paul Proteus's own life is a highly mechanized series of automatic stimulus-response behaviorisms which have been conditioned by the society in which he lives. Emotionally and intellectually he is standing on the border between feelings of guilt for his own high, well-paid position in life and feelings of disgust at the mechanization of it all. As Albert Camus wrote in The Myth of Sisyphus, "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening."[61]

[60] Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 114.

[61] Camus, p. 10.

Proteus does not like the chain of mechanical events, but he has not quite awakened into a consciousness of what his life has been all about, either. Phone conversations with his wife Anita may as well be recordings for they are usually the same and always end with, "I love you, Paul." "I love you, Anita. Goodbye." To break the monotony of his life, Proteus is unconventional enough to drive an old car, to indulge in nostalgia by donning an old leather jacket after work, and to break decorum by making occasional forays into the Homestead area to buy liquor. He hangs on to relics of the scientific past (Thomas Edison's machine shop) to reassure himself that science has come a long way since the 1880's, but he is not convinced that his own job is vital or that machines are meritorious except as abstract objects which could be entertaining and delightful by themselves. At one point, for example, Proteus fancies that the clatter of machines in Building 58 could be transformed into an artificial orchestral "suite" by a composer. Vonnegut's odd prediction of machine-music is one step beyond the mechanical player piano which emphasizes the meaninglessness of a world in which men and talent are almost unnecessary. Ironically, scientific technology has recently produced a synthesizer capable of imitating almost all musical instruments and is able to play nearly everything from Bach to rock. Science has shown man that with one machine it can obviate an entire symphony orchestra.

The one machine which is not so entertaining is EPICAC, a giant computer resting in the Carlsbad Caverns which determines, among other things, how much of a given commodity the community can absorb and issues orders on that basis. In a sense, the ultimate revolution has

come about--machines have replaced the necessity of men as thinking beings. The defendants of EPICAC brag that as a machine, EPICAC is free of "reason-muddying emotions"[62] which plague man and get in the way of his clear-sighted decision-making processes. EPICAC, however, is not infallible, and the Shah of Bratpuhr speaks words of true wisdom in calling it a "false god"[63] for not solving an ancient riddle which would end the suffering of mankind. The riddle

> Silver bells shall light my way,
> And nine times nine maidens fill my day,
> And mountain lakes will sink from sight,
> And tigers' teeth will fill the night.[64]

happens to be as nonsensical as the faith men put in EPICAC, and perhaps Vonnegut is suggesting that men should stop fussing with riddles and gadgets and return to common sense for problem-solving. As Paul Proteus belatedly realizes, "The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings . . . not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems."[65]

The denouement of Player Piano reveals Kurt Vonnegut's equivocal position on the question, "What are people for?" The main part of the novel is constructed to engender sympathy for those individuals, engineers and workers alike, who are clearly victimized by a scientific age gone berserk with inventiveness. What the end of the book reveals

[62] Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 116.

[63] Ibid., p. 122.

[64] Ibid., p. 121.

[65] Ibid., p. 297.

is that people can be incredibly stupid, bull-headed, and virtually unable to learn anything from their mistakes. "Vonnegut's characters, in their naieveté and imperceptivity, fail to locate the source of their discontent in the reality of tedium vitae. Rather, they assume that either the destruction of machines will return them to paradise, or increased mechanization will create a paradise such as even the eyes and ears of the Cybernetic Age have not heard."[66]

A group of disenchanted and disaffected engineers and workers led by Reverend Lasher, Luke Lubbock, Ed Finnerty, and a somewhat unwilling Paul Proteus, are organized into a revolutionary Ghost Shirt Society which believes that "the world should be restored to the people."[67] The relationship between the Ghost Shirts and their Indian predecessors is that "the machines are to practically everybody what the white men were to the Indians. People are finding that, because of the way the machines are changing the world, more and more of their old values don't apply anymore. People have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves, or wards of the machines."[68]

The membership of the Ghost Shirt Society is not without a touch of irony with regard to the fearsome power of secret organizations in the United States. The purpose, which is of dubious value, is to radicalize every fraternal organization in the United States so that groups of Eagles, Knights, Elks, Masons, and so on would march together to

[66]Mary Sue Schriber, "You've Come a Long Way, Babbitt! From Zenith to Ilium," Twentieth Century Literature, 17 (April 1971), 106.

[67]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 272.

[68]Ibid., p. 274.

destroy the most onerous dehumanizing machines. Ironically, but not unexpectedly, the Ghost Shirts organize, get roaring drunk, and proceed to disregard all rules prohibiting bloodshed, pillaging, and excessive damaging of property. On a rampage typical of aspects of any revolution, the men destroy all machines in sight including clocks, refrigerators, and other modern necessities. "Bodies lay everywhere, in grotesque attitudes of violent death, but manifesting the miracle of life in a snore, a mutter, the flight of a bubble from the lips. . . . The town seemed an enormous jewel box, lined with the black and gray velvet of fly-ash, and filled with millions of twinkling treasures. . . ."[69] The coup de grâce is not that everything is destroyed, however, it is that the people, with their infernal will to tinker, immediately begin to rebuild one of the most insidious examples of a machine created by a synthetic-oriented society: the Orange-O dispenser. "The excretor of the blended wood pulp, dye, water, and orange-type flavoring was as popular as a nymphomaniac at an American Legion convention."[70] As Mary Sue Schriber points out, "Our final view of Vonnegut's satirical utopia suggests that it is the American dream realized, and regretted, but destined to be rebuilt because the bricks and mortar and computers of Ilium are but the outward signs of an inward condition: the penchant for invention and gadgetry that marks the American character and underpins a mechanistic civilization. Americans are totally and irrevocably the

[69]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 315.

[70]Ibid., p. 318.

perpetrators and victims of their own will to gadgetry."[71]

What did the "revolution" accomplish? What does it show about what people are for? It revealed once again the paradoxical nature of the human being with whom you can accomplish little and without whom you can accomplish nothing. Scientific progress is thwarted by the people because they are fallible and prone to mistakes, but neither science nor life can go on without them. Ed Finnerty says, after viewing the monumental fiasco the revolution has turned into, "If only it weren't for the people, the goddamned people . . . always getting tangled up in the machinery. If it weren't for them, earth would be an engineer's paradise."[72] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. would probably do anything to prevent an "engineer's paradise" from happening even though his own answer to "What are people for?" is not always a positive one in Player Piano.

Cat's Cradle provides a more explicit indictment of the world of scientific invention than Player Piano. In both novels the scientific world is one inhabited by men whose intellectual tinkering with scientific inventions leads to undesireable ends. In Player Piano the result of too much gadgeteering is a people's revolt which destroys everything mechanical. In Cat's Cradle the result of the scientist's irresponsibility for his own destructive inventions is the end of the world. What prevents Cat's Cradle from becoming a dismal forecast of doom is Vonnegut's black humor.

[71]Schriber, p. 103.

[72]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 313.

Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the inventors of the atom bomb, is the scientist responsible for the destruction of the world because he also invented a substance called "ice-nine," an ice crystal with a melting point of over one hundred degrees Farenheit which froze every drop of water on Earth. Ironically, the ice-nine was not developed to freeze the world. It was created to help extricate Marines who became stuck in mud. Ice-nine is only a fictional device, but it is also a substance not unlike some of the death-dealing germs scientists have invented at the request of the military supposedly for peaceful purposes, but which in the wrong hands could be used to destroy the world in a germal war. As Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. says, "Every new piece of scientific knowledge is [not] a good thing for humanity."[73] When Felix Hoenikker gives splinters of the ice-nine to his three irresponsible, disturbed children, each of whom then uses it for his own personal advancement, Vonnegut asks, "What hope can there be for mankind . . . when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as ice-nine to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?"[74]

The search for truth was supposed to be "the main thing about Dr. Hoenikker,"[75] along with his endeavours in "pure research" at General Forge and Foundry Co. in Ilium, N.Y. To Vonnegut, there is something inherently absurd in the assumption that "scientific truth" can be dis-

[73]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 297.

[74]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 164.

[75]Ibid., p. 44.

covered. Through an invented religion called "Bokononism" Vonnegut comments, "Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible."[76] The only truths scientists find are ones which kill, and consequently, Vonnegut satirizes the scientist in Cat's Cradle who says, "New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become."[77] The irony in the quest for truth is compounded by the comment of Miss Faust, a secretary who worked with Dr. Hoenikker. She remarks, "I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person."[78] For Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, the search for truth means bargaining his soul with the Devil; for Dr. Hoenikker discovery of scientific truth means awareness of death. Kurt Vonnegut's epigraph in Cat's Cradle indicates what he thinks about truth. "Nothing in this book is true. Live by the foma [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy."

Dr. Hoenikker is not exactly an evil man, not consciously that is, because most of the time he is completely unconscious and oblivious of the real world around him. He tipped his wife at the breakfast table once, he never played with his children, and apparently, he was unconcerned about the uses to which his inventions were put. As Newt Hoenikker comments about his father, "He was one of the best-protected human beings who ever lived. People couldn't get at him because he just

[76]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 118.

[77]Ibid., p. 36.

[78]Ibid., p. 44.

wasn't interested in people."[79] The day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Dr. Hoenikker was not lamenting the uses to which his scientific knowledge was put, he was home making a cat's cradle out of some string which (ironically) came off a book about the end of the world. Hoenikker was not in the habit of playing games, and the cat's cradle was the only one he ever played. "Why should I bother with made-up games," Hoenikker observed, "when there are so many real ones going on?"[80] The cat's cradle, however, is more than just a game; it is a symbol of the illusory nature of reality, of the meaninglessness of life, a representation of "the sticky nets of human futility"[81] and a symbol of the differences between what appears to be and what is. As Newt Hoenikker says, "No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look at all those X's. . . . [But there is] no damn cat, and no damn cradle."[82] For Dr. Hoenikker to be playing such a game indicates that he is not completely crazy; he realizes that the real games are the absurd ones going on outside in the real world away from his scientist's laboratory. However, there is no doubt about the fact that Hoenikker's craziness has helped create this absurd reality of atom bombs and ice-nine and mega-death.

J. Robert Oppenheimer once noted, with regard to the scientist's awareness of the death substances science creates that "In some crude

[79]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 18.

[80]Ibid., p. 17.

[81]Ibid., p. 113.

[82]Ibid., p. 114.

sense, which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."[83] Newt Hoenikker wrote that his father was unaware of this knowledge of sin Oppenheimer talks about. "Do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, 'Science has now known sin.' And do you know what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'"[84]

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is aware of the absurdities of a modern world in which science has created so many unnatural ways to die, and as Richard Boyd Hauck has noted, "his tragedy and laughter are based on the absurd recognition that life means death."[85] Nothing illustrates this awareness better than the black humor in the following passage often cited from Cat's Cradle in which Philip Castle tells the narrator about the plague which hit the island of San Lorenzo causing thousands of deaths. The irony of man's inability to combat nature with science is heightened by the name of the jungle hospital--The House of Hope and Mercy--where man's hope and mercy are laughably inadequate. Vonnegut shows that the only response to the grotesqueness of mass death is laughter.

[83]J. Robert Oppenheimer, "Lecture, Nov. 25, 1947," The Great Quotations, comp. George Seldes, (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), p. 63.

[84]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 21.

[85]Hauck, p. 244.

'One time,' said Castle, 'when I was about fifteen, there was a mutiny near here on a Greek ship bound from Hong Kong to Havana with a load of wicker furniture. The mutineers got control of the ship, didn't know how to run her, and smashed her up on the rocks near 'Papa' Monzano's castle. Everybody drowned but the rats. The rats and the wicker furniture came ashore.'

That seemed to be the end of the story, but I couldn't be sure. 'So?'

'So some people got free furniture, and some people got bubonic plague. At Father's hospital, we had fourteen hundred deaths inside of ten days. Have you ever seen anyone die of bubonic plague?'

'That unhappiness has not been mine.'

'The lymph glands in the groin and the armpits swell to the size of a grapefruit.'

'I can well believe it.'

'After death, the body turns black--coals to Newcastle in the case of San Lorenzo. When the plague was having everything its own way, the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle looked like Auschwitz or Buchenwald. We had stacks of dead so deep and wide that a bulldozer actually stalled trying to shove them toward a common grave. Father worked without sleep for days, worked not only without sleep but without saving many lives, either. . . .'

'Well, finish your story, anyway.'

'Where was I?'

'The bubonic plague. The bulldozer was stalled by corpses.'

'Oh, yes. Anyway, one sleepless night I stayed up with Father while he worked. It was all we could do to find a live patient to treat. In bed after bed we found dead people.

'And Father started giggling,' Castle continued.

'He couldn't stop. He walked out into the night with his flashlight. He was still giggling. He was making the flashlight beam dance over all the dead people stacked outside. He put his hand on my head, and do you know what that marvelous man said to me?' asked Castle.

'Nope.'

'Son,' my father said to me, 'someday this will all be yours.'[86]

The meaninglessness of the world, the absurdity of a world in which man's scientific advancements can do nothing to halt the inevitability of death is apparent from the passage just quoted. But it is also apparent that Vonnegut is not despairing; his response to the world he

[86] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, pp. 111-12

sees as absurd is laughter. "Mankind's inheritance is a heritage of death. The capacity to giggle is not a capacity to annihilate death; it is man's echo of death. The giggle in the jungle proves to us that the cosmic joke is our own invention after all."[87]

[87] Hauck, p. 244.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGION: LIES! A PACK OF FOMA

Science does not give man an answer to the most important questions he is asking about the meaning of life in the universe. Though many people place their faith and trust in scientific miracles, science has often disappointed believers by inventing "the truth that kills"[88] instead of a truth that has meaning. Religion is another avenue along which people travel looking for a safe oasis to shelter them from the nagging awareness that ultimately life ends in death, and beyond death lies uncertainty. Kurt Vonnegut has invented two new religions which provide some of his characters with an explanation for the absurdities of modern life.

Vonnegut's temerity in inventing two religions in his novels and the compounding of that rashness by criticizing certain aspects of Christianity have been stumbling blocks for some readers who have failed to see Vonnegut's purpose in his inventions and the meaning of his satire. Vonnegut is not the first writer to notice the inconsistencies of the Christian religion. Mark Twain, in "The Mysterious Stranger," wrote the following account of some of the loopholes within Christianity which postulates

> a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize

[88] Scholes, The Hollins Critic, p. 8.

> their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented hell--mouths mercy and invented hell--mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him. . . [89]

In Cat's Cradle the new religion Kurt Vonnegut presents is called "Bokononism" created by a Negro named Lionel Boyd Johnson. In The Sirens of Titan the new religion is organized around "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent" invented by Winston Niles Rumfoord. Vonnegut's new religions are noticeably different from traditional Christianity in that they are founded basically on principles of humanity, love, kindness and respect. There is no suggestion of a jealous, vindictive God, no hints of religious wars being sanctioned, no mystical reliance on the election of a few chosen souls to the rewards of an afterlife while the sinful rest are doomed to Hell. Vonnegut's religious inventions do not depend on a system of rewards and punishments which threatens the guilty and the innocent alike.

Lionel Boyd Johnson, creator of Bokononism, was once a member of a wealthy family in Tobago who was briefly educated in London until World War I. After the war, his itinerant wanderings aboard various ships landed him on the island of San Lorenzo, a mythical South Sea haven of poverty, disease, hunger and ignorance. Arriving with Johnson on San

[89]Twain, The Portable Mark Twain, p. 743.

Lorenzo was Earl McCabe, a Marine deserter who agreed to become the island's dictator. His job was to overhaul the economy and the laws while Johnson's task involved designing a new religion for the inhabitants. Their hope was to make a Utopia out of an economically depressed area. As Bokonon ("Bokonon" is the San Lorenzan pronunciation of Johnson) writes in the following "Calypso" (religious poem):

> I wanted all things
> To seem to make some sense,
> So we all could be happy, yes,
> Instead of tense.
> And I made up lies
> So that they all fit nice,
> And I made this sad world
> A par-a-dise.[90]

While Bokonon invented the religion, McCabe outlawed it according to their plan, making the worship of Bokononism punishable by death. Naturally this fact made the religion secret and popular: all San Lorenzans are devout Bokononists. Not only is Bokononism outlawed and illegal, as the "Calypso" suggests, it is based on lies. Vonnegut makes Bokononism a religion of lies because any religion is in some senses as absurd as the world for which it is created. Since man cannot know ultimate reality and since he is unable to arrive at a logical explanation of the meaning of existence, all religions are, in a philosophical sense, based on the "lies" of their founders. Bokononism, which admits its own lies, is no more than Bokonon's attempt to create meaning for modern man in his absurd condition. The lies of the invented religion mean that no one has to take anything Bokonon says seriously because he cannot be trusted to tell the truth. Paradoxically, however, these

[90]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 90.

"sacred lies" of Bokononism are what make the religion popular. The people on San Lorenzo perversely believe in Bokonon's untruths, perhaps because they provide a relative system in which meaning can be temporarily posited. The lies, in other words, are necessary for man. They are useful in explaining an otherwise unexplainable life. Jonah, the narrator of Cat's Cradle, says that "anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book."[91]

At the heart of Bokononism is the belief that man is the only sacred thing and the assumption that anyone "who thinks he sees what God is doing . . ."[92] is a fool. In spite of man's clouded view of life's purpose, it is written in the Books of Bokonon that man must tell himself that he understands life's mysteries even when he knows he does not. Bokonon seems to be aware that whatever "drama men pretend soon becomes (for better or worse) the only reality that is."[93] As another of Bokonon's "Calypsos" states:

> Tiger got to hunt,
> Bird got to fly;
> Man got to sit and wonder, 'Why, why, why?'
> Tiger got to sleep,
> Bird got to land;
> Man got to tell himself he understand.[94]

Man's condition is unique in that, unlike other animals, his nature is to wonder and reflect. His powers of reasoning make him yearn for a

[91]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 14.

[92]Ibid., p. 13.

[93]Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism, p. 244.

[94]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 124.

rational truth, for a meaning for his own existence. As the Calypso implies, animals must cease doing what is natural and reasonable for them to do--they must eventually "sleep" and "land." The human animal must also stop doing what is natural. He must stop thinking about himself; he must rest and tell himself, however temporarily, that he understands what is going on. In his book The Open Decision, Jerry Bryant has commented that in the Calypso quoted above, "Bokonon cites the familiar problem of the absurd, the desire of man to find objective meaning in the world about him and the unwillingness of that world to yield up any such meaning."[95] In such a world, a Bokononist must stop his reasoning occasionally. When he thinks of "how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is," the Bokononist resigns himself and says, "Busy, busy, busy."[96] The black humor of Bokononism lies in its oversimplified rendering of man's complex search for truth and meaning. For some people it would be an immense relief to look up in the sky and say simply, "Busy, busy, busy," thus temporarily ending the dilemma of existence.

Man's sense of hopelessness, futility and alienation is somewhat alleviated by religious faith. Bokononism provides a way for man to face an unpleasant world without yielding to despair. Jerome Klinkowitz has pointed out that Bokononism, relatively speaking, is a religion quite unlike other faiths in that it is more benign and humane in its lies. "The 'lies' of this particular religion are purgative, restoring

[95]Jerry Bryant, The Open Decision (New York: Free Press, 1970), p. 317.

[96]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 51.

man's happiness, balance and comfort. Bokononism re-orders our notion of the finite world so that we may accept it, rather than simply rebel against it in fruitless anger."[97] Bokononism, like other religions, has its own philosophy and liturgy to express its objective and subjective "truths." "Boko-maru," for example, is a ritual in which two people rub the soles of their feet together to achieve "the mingling of awarenesses."[98] "Boko-maru" is a mingling of souls. It is a love experience without sex set to a ceremonial chant which goes as follows:

> We will touch our feet, yes,
> Yes, for all we're worth,
> And we will love each other, yes,
> Yes, like we love our Mother Earth.[99]

Thus, Bokonon invented a religion based on love, ecology, population control, lies, and an awareness that his religious lies will keep the San Lorenzans from thinking too much about the squalor and poverty of their daily lives.

Bokonon is aware of the necessary falsity of his religion for the temporary well-being of the San Lorenzans, since it allows them to gloss over the unpleasant, tragic aspects of existence on an unproductive island. In "Between Time and Timbuctu--A Space Fantasy" produced on National Educational Television March 13, 1972, Kurt Vonnegut has Bokonon say that "when the truth of life becomes too terrible that truth becomes your enemy." Bokononism itself is the most paradoxical of relig-

[97] Jerome Klinkowitz, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. And the Crime of His Times," Critique, 12, No. 3 (1971), 46.

[98] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 109.

[99] Ibid.

ions in that it reflects both "the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it."[100]

The comic relief of Bokononism is a necessity for Cat's Cradle. It is a safety valve allowing escape from the nihilistic reality Vonnegut presents via the dangers of ice-nine and the horrifying irresponsibility of scientists like Dr. Felix Hoenikker. Bokononism is Vonnegut's offering of a relatively sane response to a mad world in which annihilation is forever imminent. "Vonnegut in essence is asking how in an age of computers, automation, an increasingly overcrowded planet, and flick-of-a-switch annihilation can man keep his individuality and his belief in a meaningful purpose in life?"[101] One of Vonnegut's points in Cat's Cradle is that the foma or harmless untruths which form the Bokononist religion are better and safer for man to place his faith in than the more destructive, harmful "truths" of science.

In spite of the laughable absurdities of the Bokononist faith with its attendant forbidden rituals, it serves an essential purpose for believers. By shifting man's attention away from himself and onto Bokononism, the religion gives its adherents a new value system--one which takes away the onerous responsibility of man as the center of the universe and suggests that someone else is responsible for the human condition. Bokonon, however, does not give his followers a faith which

[100] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 189.

[101] Raymond C. Palmer, "Vonnegut's Major Concerns," Iowa English Yearbook, No. 14 (Fall 1969), 3.

stresses a glorious hereafter, nor does he offer much optimism about man's future in view of the ignorance and irresponsibility man has already shown in the past. In the title of the Fourteenth Book of Bokonon the mountebank-prophet asks, "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" The answer is one word: "Nothing."[102]

In spite of Bokonon's pessimism, he is not a nihilist. He is aware of the absurd world, of its refusal to yield the ultimate meaning of existence, of the powerlessness of man's reason, but he does not surrender to despair. As "the inventor of religious and civil tension in San Lorenzo (and thus the inventor of meaning where life is patently meaningless) . . ."[103] Bokonon adopts the philosophy which Albert Camus discusses in The Myth of Sisyphus: he embraces an attitude of scorn and defiance. The final words he writes in The Books of Bokonon indicate that Bokonon convinces "himself that an acceptance of what he must accept [death via ice-nine] is an act of will. . . ."[104] By adopting Camus' philosophy that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn,"[105] Bokonon accepts his own fate, scorns the gods responsible for it, and then he creates his own meaning out of absurdity by advocating an act of defiance:

> If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I

[102] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 164.

[103] Hauck, p. 244.

[104] Ibid., p. 7.

[105] Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 90.

> would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who.[106]

Bokonon's defiant attitude is itself a ludicrous and absurd response. It is a blackly humorous reaction to life's meaninglessness.

When Bokonon became conscious of the fact that ice-nine had destroyed the world, he wrote a final "Calypso." These last words reflect the fact of God's ultimate, mystifying inscrutability. They reveal that man cannot understand his own existence, and that he will claim that God is indifferent in an attempt to come to some kind of explanation for what is absolutely beyond him.

> Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end.
> And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.
> And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God,
> Why go right ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod.[107]

For Bokonon, who, like all men must face his own death, the power of the imagination makes reality temporarily bearable, but even his imagined religion fails to satisfy in the end. Partly frozen by ice-nine Bokonon wants to become a nose-thumbing, eternally defiant symbol of the absurd world which consistently refuses to tell him what he (and Vonnegut) needs and wants to know most--"What are people for?" In the Bokononist religion, God does not give man knowledge of life's purpose--it is up to man to create his own meaning. In the First Book of Bokonon (Bokonon's version of Genesis) the first question man asks of God is:

[106] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 191.

[107] Ibid., p. 180.

'What is the purpose of all this?'
'Everything must have a purpose?' asked God.
'Certainly,' said man.
'Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,' said God.[108]

God leaves it up to man to invent his own lies or to believe in the lies others have invented so that he can tell himself he comprehends life's purpose. As Leslie Fiedler says, "The not-quite nihilism of the book's close is a product of the tension between the religion of Bokononism, which advocates formulating and believing sacred lies, and the vision granted to the dwarfed son of the Father of the Bomb [Newt Hoenikker] of the emptiness behind all lies, however sacred."[109]

Kurt Vonnegut's other religious invention, found in The Sirens of Titan, is Winston Niles Rumfoord's "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent." It is similar to Bokononism in many respects--as a reflection of man's necessity for a religion to explain a life which is virtually unexplainable by other means, and in its postulation of a God who is indifferent to the wishes and desires of man. But Kurt Vonnegut is even more satirical in The Sirens of Titan with respect to religion than he is in Cat's Cradle. In The Sirens of Titan, more than in any other of his novels, Vonnegut depends on science-fiction to give him the objective distance he needs to criticize man's follies without being accused of being too cynical or too pessimistic. The fantasy world of outer space lessens the reader's resistance to Vonnegut's satire. It diminishes the awareness that Vonnegut is actually writing about the

[108]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 177.

[109]Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," Esquire, 74 (Sept. 1970), 203.

present and the past, not some fantastical future.

In The Sirens of Titan the same question that Vonnegut struggles with in his other novels, "What are people for?" appears once again in connection with the invention of religion. Winston Niles Rumfoord's suspicion that people have no purpose is confirmed by Salo, a machine shaped like a plumber's friend from the planet Tralfamadore. Salo, temporarily grounded on the planet Titan by the failure of a part in his ship's power plant, explains to Rumfoord that creatures on Tralfamadore (like Earthlings) wanted to discover what their purpose was. "These poor creatures were obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose, and that some purposes were higher than others."[110] They invented machines for serving human purposes and, ultimately, machines were invented to determine the highest purpose of Tralfamadorian existence. "The machines reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all."[111]

For two hundred thousand years Salo has waited on Titan for the replacement part for his space ship to arrive in order that he can fulfill the purpose in life the Tralfamadorians finally discovered: to deliver an inter-galactic message consisting of one word, "Greetings." Though the message may be regarded as an absurd explanation of human experience, it does show through the word "Greetings," at least a reflection of life's desire to communicate with other life delivered from whatever may possibly be "Out There." As Jerry Bryant has noted,

[110] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 275.

[111] Ibid.

"Ironically sent by machines who seem to recognize its significance before the human Earthlings do, the message demonstrates the desire to affirm life through contact with it. . . ."[112]

Vonnegut gives the reader doubts about Salo's credibility just as he creates suspicion about Bokonon by making the religious inventor a liar. While Salo is not a liar, Vonnegut explains that Salo and what he is supposedly doing are simply authorial poetic imaginings. ("The image was poetic, as was Salo's expedition.")[113] By treating Salo as another fictive imagining, and by his occasional reminders that Salo is really no more than an elaborate machine, Vonnegut leaves an escape route for himself and makes Salo's declared purpose in life as dubious and as attractive as the two religions Vonnegut invents.

Salo informs Winston Niles Rumfoord that Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero, the Moscow Kremlin, and the Palace of the League of Nations are simply huge structures built to convey messages to himself about the impending arrival of his ship's replacement part. Vonnegut suggests, through this fantastically absurd science-fiction narrative, that human history is absurd; it has no rational purpose, there is no God-directed design. Given man's total inability to understand the past, Salo and his rendering of human history is about as plausible an explanation as any other yet offered. People seemingly have no purpose except to provide a spare part for Salo's space ship on the planet Titan. "Human history has been a

[112]Bryant, p. 307.

[113]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 269.

Tralfamadorian communications system, with the rise and fall of each civilization adding up to a completed or aborted Tralfamadorian message. . . . It is a fantasy of total cosmic control, and the cosmic futility of the centuries of human effort and suffering that have gone to effect this trivial act of delivery is underlined by the fact that the message which Salo is carrying from one side of the Universe to the other is simply a dot--which means 'Greetings.'"[114]

The black humor underlying the absurd, highly ironic Tralfamadorian purpose forces the reader to laugh at the meaninglessness of life Vonnegut once again suggests: the dark suspicion that Vonnegut may be correct lingers even though one is aware that his concept of reality is safely ensconced in the realm of science-fiction.

Winston Niles Rumfoord's discovery of the vast indifference of God stems from his own exploration of outer space, his assumption that Salo is correct about the non-purpose of human life, and the resultant radical changes in his views of time and death. During Rumfoord's lifetime, Earthlings had decided that space exploration was much too costly, it never increased anyone's wealth, and, "on the basis of horse sense and the best scientific information, there was nothing good to be said for the exploration of space."[115] Kurt Vonnegut is criticizing and satirizing the American space program which he considers a waste of time, money and effort. Once again he uses science fiction as a vehicle for satire, in this case by means of the "chrono-synclastic infundibula",

[114]Tony Tanner, "The Uncertain Messenger: A Study of the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Critical Quarterly, 11 (Winter 1969), 299.

[115]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 30.

the discovery of which is another important reason why no country chooses to send off more space ships.

Vonnegut explains that a "chrono-synclastic infundibilum" is a "mathematical point where all opinions, no matter how contradictory, harmonized."[116] As Vonnegut defines this phenomena in his mythical A Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do, it is "a place where all the different kinds of truths fit together. . . . Chrono (Kroh-no) means time. Synclastic (sin-class-tik) means curved toward the same side in all directions, like the skin of an orange. Infundibulum (in-fun-dib-u-lum) is . . . like . . . a funnel."[117] The chrono-synclastic infundibula made man's idea that he was going to get somewhere in space seem ridiculous. There was nowhere to go, nothing to prove. Vonnegut's satiric comment about the end of space exploration is that "it was a situation made to order for American fundamentalist preachers"[118] because it convinced them that space ships were no different from the Biblical Tower of Babel, and God doesn't want man to get to Heaven by building such structures. Fundamentalist preacher Bobby Denton claims God said to the space travellers, "No! Get away from there! You aren't going to Heaven or anywhere else with that thing! Quit talking the language of science to each other. . . ! Don't look to rockets for salvation--look to your homes and churches!"[119]

[116]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Happy Birthday, Wanda June (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. ix.

[117]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, pp. 14-15.

[118]Ibid., p. 31.

[119]Ibid., p. 32.

Winston Niles Rumfoord's private space ship "The Whale" runs into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum which turns him and his dog Kazak into "wave phenomena--apparently pulsing in a distorted spiral with its origin in the Sun and its terminal in Betelguese."[120] For Rumfoord, existence in a time warp alters his entire concept of Earthling reality; being able to materialize on Earth, Mars, the planet Titan and other places makes the traditional notion of time an absurdity. Rumfoord thus adopts the Tralfamadorian view of life which he learns from the messenger Salo. To the Tralfamadorian, such concepts as time, death and free will do not exist. Each moment simply is because there is no past, present or future. Time is seen as one "might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. . . . Only on Earth is there any talk of free will."[121] The existence of life is utterly random, and because of their view of time, death does not exist even as a concept for the Tralfamadorians, nor does death exist as the conclusion to life, since they are all machines shaped like plumber's friends. From Salo's point of view, Earthling religious observances are the height of lunacy and futility. "The Earthlings behaved at all times as though there were a big eye in the sky--as though that big eye were ravenous for entertainment. The big eye was a glutton for great theatre. The big eye was indifferent as to whether the Earthling shows were comedy, tragedy, farce, satire, athletics, or vaudeville."[122]

[120] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 13.

[121] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 74.

[122] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 276.

Salo's view of Earthling religion suggests the absurdity of man's attempts to posit meaning in a universe where there is no meaning and, as Vonnegut implies, perhaps only a Tralfamadorian purpose. Winston Niles Rumfoord's religion, "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent," develops out of his awareness that out in space life is without purpose; man's activities are irrelevant. Life and death are accidents over which man has no control. Rumfoord is aware of the absurdity of a universe which yields only non-meaning, and Vonnegut shows that his religion is an outgrowth of his frustrated attempts at discovering what the purpose of life really is. In one moment of exasperation Rumfoord comments, "Everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been."[123] According to Rumfoord, the motto of his new religion is, "Take Care of People and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself."[124] The two chief teachings are, "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God."[125]

Frustrated by the seeming randomness of life, Rumfoord chooses a kind of negative prophet for his religion named Malachi Constant, whose own life is a good example of blind luck and God's indifference. Stanley Schatt has pointed out that "it is highly ironic that Rumfoord eagerly manipulates Malachi Constant in his efforts to create an institution that expounds his own views . . . while in reality he is being

[123]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 287.

[124]Ibid., p. 180.

[125]Ibid.

manipulated by Tralfamadorians in just the way he finds intolerable."[126] Nevertheless, Malachi Constant is used for a specific purpose in The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent.

Malachi Constant's name means "faithful messenger."[127] He is purported to be the "richest American and a notorious rakehell,"[128] and his shallow excuse for the events of his own life is the motto, "I guess somebody up there likes me."[129] Rumfoord turns Malachi Constant into a symbol of man's capacity for greed, a "symbol of wrong-headedness"[130] and a symbol of zero moral worth.

> 'We are disgusted by Malachi Constant,' said Winston Niles Rumfoord . . . 'because he used the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck to finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig. . . . We hate Malachi Constant . . . because he accepted the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck without a qualm, as though luck were the hand of God. To us of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, there is nothing more cruel, more dangerous, more blasphemous that a man can do than to believe that--that luck, good or bad, is the hand of God!'[131]

Malachi Constant is a dupe. He is used by Rumfoord to further his own belief that men are foolish creatures who kill and make war on each other for no purpose. Constant is a man totally without any positive value, so Rumfoord creates meaning for his life and gives him a purpose.

[126] Stanley Schatt, "The World Picture of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." Diss. Univ. of So. California, 1970, p. 21.

[127] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 17.

[128] Ibid., p. 11.

[129] Ibid., p. 7.

[130] Ibid., p. 255.

[131] Ibid., p. 252.

To further his use of Malachi Constant as the detestable believer in blind luck, Rumfoord's religion creates the "Malachi doll," an image of Constant symbolizing "a repellent way of life that was no more."[132] Constant's experiences on Mars, Mercury and Titan were engineered by Rumfoord so that Constant could "find himself."[133] He proves himself to be a pig by making love to an unwilling Beatrice Rumfoord (Winston Niles Rumfoord's nominal wife) aboard his space ship. This act results in the birth of a son, "Chrono." Rumfoord explains that Beatrice is as detested by the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent for her "refusing to risk her imagined purity in living"[134] as Malachi Constant is detested for his wallowing in filth.

> The excesses of Beatrice were excesses of reluctance. . . . As a younger woman she felt so exquisitely bred as to do nothing and to allow nothing to be done to her for fear of contamination. Life, for Beatrice . . . was too full of germs and vulgarity to be anything but intolerable. . . . The proposition that God Almighty admired Beatrice for her touch-me-not breeding is at least as questionable as the proposition that God Almighty wanted Malachi Constant to be rich.[135]

Both Beatrice and Malachi Constant eventually change for the better as a result of their lives spent together on Titan. Constant's life involves a gradual awareness of his unforgiveable behavior and attempts to correct the mistakes he made. "He became hopelessly engrossed in the intricate tactics of causing less rather than more pain. Proof of

[132] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 219.

[133] Ibid., p. 160.

[134] Ibid., p. 261.

[135] Ibid., pp. 261-62

his success would be his winning of the woman's forgiveness and understanding."[136] Vonnegut leads one to believe that Constant succeeds after a fashion. Beatrice somewhat belatedly realizes that there is more to life than what she was brought up to believe. She and Constant prove, as Rumfoord's hateful examples of humanity, that there may be some hope for human improvement.

Winston Niles Rumfoord's new religion is man-centered. It is humane. The bells on his church proclaim that there is no hell. A prayer offered by the Reverend C. Horner Redwine of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent summarizes the philosophy invented by Rumfoord-Vonnegut: "Oh Lord . . . what could we do for Thee that Thou couldst not do for Thyself one octillion times better? Nothing. What could we do or say that could possibly interest Thee? Nothing. Oh, Mankind, rejoice in the apathy of our Creator, for it makes us free and truthful and dignified at last."[137]

The trouble with Winston Niles Rumfoord's search for life's purpose via his religion is that, according to Vonnegut, any search for meaning will be futile when it is restricted to the external world. Salo's message "Greetings," the Tralfamadorian life-purpose, and the invented religion are not enough to explain the dilemma of existence. Vonnegut suggests that while these explanations may suffice temporarily, man must eventually look somewhere other than religion or outer space for meaning. In the beginning of The Sirens of Titan Vonnegut

[136] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 162.

[137] Ibid., p. 215.

proposes that the explanation of life is more likely to be found within the self than outside it.

> Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself. But mankind wasn't always so lucky. Less than a century ago men and women did not have easy access to the puzzle boxes within them. . . . Gim-crack religions were big business. Mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward--pushed ever outward. What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what creation was all about. . . . [With the discovery that death and meaninglessness was all there was to be found] outwardness lost, at last, its imagined attractions. Only inwardness remained to be explored. Only the human soul remained terra incognita. This was the beginning of goodness and wisdom.[138]

Thus Vonnegut anticipates the doctrine of Bokonon in Cat's Cradle that man is the only sacred thing. Both Bokonon and Rumfoord eventually discover that their invented religions fail to provide an insight into man's reason for being, and they imply that if man is not to give in to despair and nihilism he must see that meaning and purpose can be found only by his own creative acts. To Vonnegut, self-knowledge (subjective examination) yields more meaning of life than the search for truth in the objective world.

Vonnegut's religious criticism is partly based on the fact that religion can be an "opiate of the people" to the extent that it encourages a search for objective meaning in an absurd world where no objective meaning can be found instead of encouraging a subjective, self-examining search. Religion is an "opiate" in the Bokononist sense that it focuses attention away from the unpleasantness of reality and urges people to look for better things in the afterlife rather than to create

[138]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, pp. 7-8.

a more satisfactory present.

Examples of Vonnegut's religious satire are abundant. In God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Eliot Rosewater reveals that there is no point in doing good deeds in life with the hope of attaining Paradise, because Paradise is a bore. "Heaven is the bore of bores. . . . There is no inside here. There is no outside here. To pass through the gates in either direction is to go from nowhere to nowhere and from everywhere to everywhere."[139] Rosewater's observation brings to mind Mark Twain's wry comment that judging from descriptions of the celestial afterlife, he would prefer Heaven for climate but Hell for society.

In Cat's Cradle Vonnegut writes a Bokononist's parody of the Christian version of man's creation.

> God made mud. . . .
> God got lonesome. . . .
> So God said to some of the mud, 'Sit up. . . !
> "See all I've made,' said God, 'the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars.'
> And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around. . . .
> Lucky me, lucky mud. . . .[140]

The ironic implication of the Bokononist view of creation is that while religion invents a life-giving purpose for mud science destroys this "purpose" by means of Dr. Hoenikker's ice-nine which was originally invented to freeze mud.

What the Bokononist says before he commits suicide is, "Now I will destroy the whole world," a declaration which implies that within the individual self lies ultimate meaning. But Vonnegut does not allow

[139] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, pp. 80-81.

[140] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 149.

this suggestion to go unchallenged. The first Bokononist to commit suicide is "Papa" Monzano, the dictator of San Lorenzo who, by eating some ice-nine, ironically becomes the beginning of a chain reaction of freezing water which eventually ends the world. Thus, in an indirect way, Kurt Vonnegut's point is that while religion can invent explanations for life, science destroys life.

In Slaughterhouse-Five criticism of Christianity is more explicit than in any of the other novels, and yet the criticism is not without the black humor accompaniment which saves it from becoming a slapstick diatribe. Kilgore Trout, the science-fiction novelist, is mentioned in Slaughterhouse-Five. He has written a novel called The Gospel From Outer Space which is a study of "why Christians found it so easy to be cruel."[141] According to Trout's novel, the Gospels were supposed to "teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowliest of the low."[142] The trouble with Christianity, in Trout's view, is that readers of the Gospels already know that Jesus is not as much of a nobody as He pretends to be. He is actually "the Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe" and when He is crucified readers learn what the Gospel actually teaches: "Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected."[143]

Kilgore Trout's new Gospel From Outer Space presents a Jesus who "really was a nobody and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with

[141] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 94.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels."[144] In this situation, the people crucify a real nobody and expect no repercussions from it, but there is a surprise ending. "Just before the nobody died, the heavens opened up, and there was thunder and lightning. The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity."[145] Thus, the lesson the new Gospel teaches is a much more effective one. "God said this: 'From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!'"[146]

Kurt Vonnegut also uses Kilgore Trout's novels to bring Christianity down to earth and to show that it too has its mundane aspects. In one of his novels, Trout's protagonist builds a time machine for the express purpose of travelling backwards in time to see Jesus. When he arrives, Jesus is twelve years old and is busy learning how to be a carpenter. "Two Roman soldiers came into the shop with a mechanical drawing on papyrus of a device they wanted built by sunrise the next morning. It was a cross to be used in the execution of a rabble-rouser. Jesus and his father built it. They were glad to have the work."[147]

Vonnegut may be heretical, to some people's way of thinking, but

[144]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 94.

[145]Ibid., p. 95.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 175.

his religious black humor reflects his basic criticism that religion is not doing as much to benefit people and the world as it pretends. It is highly ironic that, on one occasion, Slaughterhouse-Five was banned for high school readers for religious reasons. The following account which appears in the June, 1971 issue of Christian Century is a perfect example of the kind of black humor and "misplaced piety" modern existence continually exhibits.

> Should the sweet name of Christ be invoked to conceal the depths of human cruelty and guilt? And by the judgement of a court of law?
>
> These questions arose in mid-May as a civil court judge in Oakland County, Michigan, advised Rochester High School to ban a book approved by high school officials--else he would order the book banned himself. Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel Slaughterhouse-Five was declared by Judge Arthur Moore to be a 'degradation of the person of Christ' and full of 'repetitious obscenity and immorality.' Moore handed down this decision after the father of a student brought suit against the high school, charging that the book is antireligious.[148]

The judge's view is, of course, a total misunderstanding of Vonnegut's purpose in writing Slaughterhouse-Five. Vonnegut is not against religion any more than he is against science of technology. He is against the tendency of man to use his knowledge for the wrong purposes and he is against man's willingness to have blind faith in religions which do little to explain or improve the human condition.

One of the problems some critics have had with Vonnegut's religious inventions is how to come to terms with the negative qualities of these religions and their ultimate failure to suffice as meaning-giving philosophies. Several critics have looked at Vonnegut's novels and

[148]Anon., "The Banning of Billy Pilgrim," Christian Century, 88 (June 1971) 681.

have arrived at the conclusion that what he wants to suggest in his black humor and in his satire is that people ought to love each other more. This particular theme--human need for love--occurs to some degree in all of Vonnegut's novels, most particularly in The Sirens of Titan and in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater but it is not likely that Kurt Vonnegut means to suggest that love is the only panacea for the world's ills or that it is a solution to the awareness of life's absurdities.

In The Sirens of Titan, two specific situations occur which have fostered the notion that Vonnegut is an advocate of love as a reasonable and meaningful explanation for life. In one case, Malachi Constant and a companion from Mars named Boaz have become grounded on Mercury because their space ship was lodged thousands of feet underground in a vast network of tunnels. In these labyrinthine tunnels are small creatures shaped like "spineless kites" which Vonnegut calls "harmoniums." The harmoniums live off the vibrations of the planet Mercury, and they can transmit two messages. The first is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am." The second is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are."[149] Boaz, isolated within the depths of Mercury, falls in love with the harmoniums, allowing them to thrive on the pulsations of his wrists and heart. In one sense, and here the confusion begins, the loving emotions make Boaz a decent, emotional, humane person--something he was not before he landed on Mercury. On Mercury he says, "I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm and they [the har-

[149]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 186.

moniums] love me. . . ."[150] If Vonnegut is soliciting admiration for Boaz and his new love relationship with the harmoniums, it is certainly not an unqualified solicitation. Jerry Bryant observes that "the search for objective purpose and external causes is not only futile but irrelevant. Life has value simply in the living of it, and meaning simply in the loving of other life."[151]

In Boaz's case, he finds meaning and love with the harmoniums, but it is impossible to overlook the fact that Boaz is mad. He rejects human contact and he has no desire to escape Mercury. In a sense, he turns his back on the thread of reality he has left, favoring the companionship of the mindless throbbing harmoniums to that of Malachi Constant. Boaz makes his own purpose for life out of the absurd situation he finds himself in, but the meaning he creates is pathetic as well as absurd. In spite of the love and affirmation found in the situation of Boaz, Jerry Bryant says that Vonnegut "cannot ignore the pathos--the absurdity--of the human experience. . . . [He] is concerned to show that our myths, [like Boaz and his love for harmoniums], while childish retreats from harsh reality, are also the means by which we rationalize our otherwise meaningless existence."[152]

Vonnegut's characteristic tendency to qualify his own suggestion that love and human kindness may be the solution to man's need for an explanation for the absurd world he finds himself in occurs once again

[150] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 214.

[151] Bryant, p. 308.

[152] Ibid.

at the conclusion of The Sirens of Titan. Beatrice Rumfoord, having lived on Titan with Malachi Constant and their son Chrono for many years, becomes bothered by the Tralfamadorian purpose in life which Winston Niles Rumfoord asserts is the true meaning of existence and the rationale behind his invented religion. Beatrice undertakes the writing of a book modestly called The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System which is "a refutation of Rumfoord's notion that the purpose of human life in the Solar System was to get a grounded messenger from Tralfamadore on his way again."[153] Beatrice and Malachi Constant, Vonnegut reveals, find out in their last days together that there is more to life than Rumfoord would admit. Beatrice discovers that "the worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody . . . would be to not be used for anything by anybody."[154] Constant agrees by admitting that only a year before Beatrice died he realized he had fallen in love with her. "A purpose of human life," Constant says, "no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved."[155] Even though what Beatrice and Constant assert about the value of love makes sense, it is much too simple and temporary a solution to the problem of finding ultimate meaning. Jerry Bryant explains that

> love and work are . . . the bases of human satisfaction; they are what the human being is uniquely capable of. His moral relationship to others--to society--is founded upon those attributes. They are virtues because they intensify the reality of the highest good--the individual. Yet, noble as man might be--and sometimes is--through love and work, he has

[153] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 308.

[154] Ibid., p. 310.

[155] Ibid., p. 313.

his other side, his 'lack.'[156]

The "lack" Jerry Bryant writes of is suggested by Vonnegut's failure to confirm the admirable picture he draws of Beatrice and Constant on Titan. Beatrice, Vonnegut reminds his readers, "was probably a little crazy,"[157] and it must be remembered, she had been years "on a moon with only two other people."[158] Malachi Constant, much less the despicable specimen of swinish humanity than he once was, has nevertheless been manipulated by Winston Niles Rumfoord most of his life, and has grown old roaming the Titanic peat bogs in search of a rational answer to the question "What are people for?" The fact that both Beatrice and Constant find brief satisfaction in the human love relationship does not seem to be as important as the way in which they have arrived at their own definition of life's purpose. Both ultimately reach the same attitude Bokonon found himself holding in the novel Cat's Cradle--defiance and scorn. Both refuse to accept the Tralfamadorian view that humans have been mere lackeys serving a preposterous end. Both recognize the absurdity of the human situation in their own ways, and they seem to sense the futility of the quest for ultimate meaning. Beatrice's defiance comes in the writing of her book, The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System, and Constant's defiance comes when he scorns life and scorns the fact that he has been used by Winston Niles Rumfoord.

> If anybody ever expects to use me again in some tremendous scheme of his . . . he is in for one big disappointment.

[156] Bryant, p. 304.

[157] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 308.

[158] Ibid.

> . . . As far as I'm concerned . . . the Universe is a junk yard, with everything in it overpriced. I am through poking around in the junk heaps, looking for bargains. Every so-called bargain . . . has been connected by fine wires to a dynamite bouquet. . . . I resign . . . I withdraw . . . I quit. . . . We have taken part for the last time . . . in experiments and fights and festivals we don't like or understand.[159]

What Kurt Vonnegut suggests in the defiance of Beatrice Rumfoord and Malachi Constant is that both characters come to the realization that only by conscious action, whether it be scorn, love, defiance, work, or whatever, can one create meaning for oneself in an absurd world. These actions, however, are only provisional, temporary, relative answers to man's search for ultimate meaning. Such things as love and work may suffice for a while in affirming life, but there is still the recognition that ultimately, no matter what one does to justify his existence, it will inevitably be a reflection of the absurd universe. There is no single, final, rational answer to the persistent questions "What are people for?" and "What is the purpose of all this?"

Vonnegut does not unequivocally suggest that love and kindness are the only appropriate responses to life's ambiguities. He realizes that human satisfaction must always fall short of its conception and that man, in whatever bumbling way he can will continually try to go beyond his finite, limited perspectives and will continue to look for some ultimate explanation for his own existence.

[159]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 290.

CHAPTER V

SOCIETY: WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?

Social criticism is everywhere in Kurt Vonnegut's novels. There is less black humor in connection with it and more straight satire. What he criticizes most often are the unfavorable aspects of capitalism and free enterprise, the use and mis-use of money by the wealthy, and the lunacy of the big business world in which man has been dehumanized and outdone by his own inventions.

In The Sirens of Titan Vonnegut satirizes the irrational way in which some Americans have made a fortune in stock market speculation. Noel Constant (Malachi's father) made his money by investing in stocks according to his own weird system. He changed the first sentence in Genesis to capital letters, divided them by periods and placed them in pairs: "I.N., T.H., E.B., E.G., I.N., N.I., N.G.,"[160] and so on. His next move was to buy shares of stock in corporations with those initials. It worked, and he made a fortune by doing almost nothing and by knowing almost nothing about stocks or business. "A single industrial bureaucrat," Constant's financial consultant tells him, "if he is sufficiently vital and nervous, should be able to create a ton of meaningless papers a year for the Bureau of Internal Revenue to examine."[161] For Constant, money makes more money, and a little red tape thrown in

[160] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 74.

[161] Ibid., p. 79.

to confuse the tax people works to his advantage. It is possible, Vonnegut suggests, for some people in America to make money in the most irrational, unproductive ways, while other people work and produce steadily but never manage to make a fortune.

In Slaughterhouse-Five Howard W. Campbell, Jr., double agent-spy for the United States and Germany, who tells his own story in the novel Mother Night, writes a monograph criticizing American attitudes toward money and the condition of the poor.

> Americans, like human beings everywhere, believe many things that are obviously untrue. . . . Their most destructive untruth is that it is very easy for any American to make money. They will not acknowledge how in fact hard money is to come by, and, therefore, those who have no money blame and blame and blame themselves. This inward blame has been a treasure for the rich and powerful, who have had to do less for their poor, publicly and privately, than any other ruling class since, say Napoleonic times. Many novelties have come from America. The most startling of these, a thing without precedent, is a mass of undignified poor. They do not love one another because they do not love themselves. . . .[162]

What Campbell implies about American money-making is a valid criticism of a society which allows Noel Constant to line his pockets by playing a game with initials and stocks and then sets him up as an example of virtue and industriousness to the poor who become envious and resentful of money they seemingly cannot have.

Player Piano contains some of the richest of Vonnegut's critical attitudes toward high echelon management, big-company executives, and the "corporate personality."[163] "The Meadows" is a "vacation camp" on an island used by the behemoth Ilium Works two weeks out of every year.

[162] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 112.

[163] Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 67.

Hundreds of engineers, managers and other executives (their wives and children are segregated at another camp called "The Mainland") flock to The Meadows. For fourteen days they experience compulsory morale-building team sports, rigidly scheduled fun, regulated cocktail hours, and most importantly, indoctrination in the philosophy of the corporation. Every day a loudspeaker constantly blares either music or instructions, giving the whole island an aura of a fancy, exclusive concentration camp. Phony camaraderie is fostered by the name tags executives and their juniors wear which instruct the beholder to call the wearer by his first name or to surrender five dollars. The Meadows is, in reality, a place "where the men at the head of the procession of civilization demonstrate in private that they are ten-year-olds at heart, that they haven't the vaguest notion of what they're doing to the world."[164]

Each year a play is presented at The Meadows which emphasizes the virtues of the Organization. Inevitably it is the same play with different variations as to the way in which the perennial theme is presented. The message invariably is that "the common man wasn't nearly as grateful as he should be for what the engineers and managers had given him, and that the radicals were the cause of the ingratitude."[165] In The Meadows play Vonnegut reveals a hilarious example of a self-justifying excuse for the oppression of the working class by the executives. The play involves an encounter between three characters--a radical, a workingman, and a young engineer. At one point the engineer

[164]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 265.

[165]Ibid., p. 211.

tries to tell the worker that his low salary and job benefits are better than he realizes. The engineer explains, "Thirty dollars, John--yes, that is how much money you make. But, not with all his gold and armies could Charlemagne have gotten one single electric lamp or vacuum tube! He would have given anything to get the security and health package you have, John. But could he get it? No!"[166] In the end the radical's views are downtrodden, the workingman comes to a foggy realization of the benefits of the mechanized society, and the young executive is hailed as a righteous hero who expounds golden truths.

The entire episode at The Meadows reveals the determination of the wealthy social, industrial and business leaders to keep their money where they think it belongs, and to maintain the status quo--things Vonnegut obviously disapproves of. As Mary Sue Schriber has noted in her comparison of Player Piano with Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt, "The Meadows preserves . . . the cultish and ritualistic ambience of the Boosters. . . . Industrialized, democratic America has created so much prosperity for so many people that the repudiation of but one iota of the status quo constitutes blasphemy."[167]

In God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater Kurt Vonnegut presents Eliot Rosewater, an outrageously wealthy man who shocks his family and friends by forsaking his social position to give away money, love, and understanding to the poor and needy in Rosewater, Indiana. It is Eliot Rosewater's contention that he is "going to care about" all the people in

[166] Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 207.

[167] Schriber, Twentieth Century Literature, p. 102.

the small town because he feels that Americans don't "care about themselves anymore--because they have no use."[168] In a sealed letter written to be delivered to whoever succeeds him as head of the Rosewater Foundation, Eliot voices many of Kurt Vonnegut's criticisms about the way in which wealth has been amassed by a few individuals in the United States to the detriment of the many. Rosewater millions began with a weapons factory during the Civil War. The war made Rosewater's ancestors a fortune because "Abraham Lincoln declared that no amount of money was too much to pay for the restoration of the Union, so Noah [Rosewater] priced his merchandise in scale with the national tragedy. . . . Government objections to the price or quality of his wares could be vaporized with bribes that were pitifully small."[169] There was no stopping the increasing fortune, since no laws were ever passed to limit anyone's wealth. As Kurt Vonnegut comments via Eliot Rosewater:

> Thus did a handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed. Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun.[170]

It is Eliot's belief that his own relatives' faith in the Protestant ethic and the value of "incentive" is simply an excuse to avoid

[168] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 36.

[169] Ibid., p. 11.

[170] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

looking into the real issues concerning poverty and inequality. The rich have a tendency to forget that the ability to slurp from the "Money River, where the wealth of the nation flows"[171] is a talent and a privilege they are accustomed to having from the beginning, and the slurping tends to become more and more efficient as time and generations go by.

Most poor people have no knowledge of this so-called Money River, and they stumble along in their blind hope that their hard work and sweat ought to earn them money as well as equality. At least, Rosewater comments, someone should tell the poor when they are "young enough that there is a Money River, that there's nothing fair about it, and that [they] had damn well better forget about hard work and the merit system and honesty and all that crap, and get to where the river is."[172] It is obvious that Eliot, in his ideas and through his somewhat idealistic actions in Rosewater, Indiana, would like to see money distributed more equally throughout the United States. His beliefs are a reflection of Kurt Vonnegut's own socialistic leanings which he expressed in an address delivered to the 1970 graduating class of Bennington College. In his advice to the women, Vonnegut tells them:

> I suggest that you work for a socialist form of government. Free Enterprise is much too hard on the old and the sick and the shy and the poor and the stupid, and on people nobody likes. They just can't cut the mustard under Free Enterprise. They lack that certain something that Nelson Rockefeller, for instance, so abundantly has. So let's divide up the wealth more fairly than we have divided it up so far. Let's make sure that everybody has enough to eat, and a decent place to live,

[171] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 88.

[172] Ibid., p. 89.

> and medical help when he needs it. Let's stop spending money on weapons, which don't work anyway, thank God, and spend money on each other.[173]

What Kurt Vonnegut is showing in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is his criticism of the status quo in America as well as his humor about the folly of one man's attempts to rectify singlehandedly a situation which most people see as hopelessly incorrigible. While Eliot Rosewater is blessed by the poor people he does manage to help, his own relatives accuse him of wasting his money and his time on the swine of the earth.

In order to spread his uncritical love to the people who need it, Eliot sets up an office with two telephones. One phone is a hot line for the volunteer fire department Eliot heads and is for emergencies only. The other phone is for the "Rosewater Foundation" which Eliot calls his public service organization. All day the phone rings and Eliot answers, "Rosewater Foundation, how can we help you?"[174] He gives away small amounts of money, advice, and sympathy to those who ask for it, but aspirin and a glass of wine are his most common recommendations for "people who were down in the dumps for every reason and for no reason in particular."[175] He keeps a record in his "Domesday Book" of all his clients, their complaints, and what the Rosewater Foundation did to help them. Eliot's rules for life are, "God damn it, you've got to be kind,"[176] and "Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor."[177]

[173] Vonnegut, Vogue, p. 145.

[174] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 58.

[175] Ibid., p. 78.

[176] Ibid., p. 93.

[177] Ibid., p. 15.

Eliot Rosewater follows his own rules, he is kind, he helps the poor and as one of his devotees tells him, "You gave up everything a man is supposed to want, just to help the little people, and the little people know it."[178] For Eliot, meaning and satisfaction in life are temporarily established by his "Good Samaritan" role in Rosewater, Indiana. The people in Rosewater have various kinds of hostilities, alienated feelings and frustrations which Eliot tries to assuage. "Each character senses a need for communication that Eliot offers and Vonnegut applauds."[179] By loving other people, Eliot gives value to his own identity as well as to the identities of the individuals he helps. Even Eliot's wife Sylvia, who eventually succumbs to "Samaritrophobia--hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself,"[180] initially admits that what her husband is doing in Rosewater is right simply because people are human and they need love and kindness.

To support Eliot's erratic behavior, Kurt Vonnegut once again uses the familiar character Kilgore Trout to comment on the favorable things Eliot has done for people. He seems to voice Vonnegut's opinion as well as his own when he tells Eliot:

> What you did in Rosewater County was far from insane. It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horrors will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love

[178] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 61.

[179] Leonard J. Leff, "Utopia Reconstructed: Alienation in Vonnegut's God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Critique, 12, No. 3 (1971), 37.

[180] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 41.

people who have no use?[181]

Kilgore Trout lauds Eliot's realization that people do need uncritical love and that they should be valued simply because they are human beings. Trout is aware that poverty is a social disease which can be cured rather easily, but that human feelings of utter uselessness are more difficult to alleviate. It is evident that while Trout may not see Eliot's limitations, Vonnegut does. He realizes that the good-hearted distribution of uncritical love is only a temporary, limited solution for social ills.

Ultimate faith in the power of love to right the social wrongs of the world must be withheld, because Vonnegut shows that Kilgore Trout's views cannot be taken too seriously, and that Eliot Rosewater is slightly insane. Kilgore Trout, who appears in several of Vonnegut's novels, at times functions as "a comic, self-depreciatory portrait of his author . . ." who is portrayed as "an absurd failure, driven to earn his living by supervising paper boys or redeeming Green Stamps, and obsessed by the fact that his books are only available in shops that peddle porn."[182] Sometimes Kilgore Trout writes books about the failings of human beings, which indicates that Vonnegut does use Trout as a vehicle for valid social criticism. Trout wrote a book about a money tree, for example. "It had twenty-dollar bills for leaves. Its flowers were government bonds. Its fruit was diamonds. It attracted human beings

[181]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 183.

[182]Fiedler, Esquire, p. 204.

who killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer."[183] In spite of Trout's social consciousness, he does have his "other" side revealing him to be somewhat ridiculous and untrustworthy. Vonnegut explains that as a circulation man for the Ilium Gazette, Trout "manages newspaper boys, bullies and flatters and cheats little kids."[184] Kilgore Trout, in other words, is not a completely admirable character, and Vonnegut does not always indicate that whatever Trout says is the absolute truth even though he claims at one point that "Trout had never tried to tell anything but the truth."[185] Kilgore Trout's own words and deeds do not suggest that he is as devout a believer in love and kindness as his praise of Eliot Rosewater leads one to assume. In his newspaper job,

> he was cowardly and dangerous. . . . He was telling the kids to get off their dead butts and get their daily customers to subscribe to the fucking Sunday edition, too. He said that whoever sold the most Sunday subscriptions during the next two months would get a free trip for himself and his parents to Martha's fucking Vineyard for a week, all expenses paid.[186]

While Kilgore Trout's words and deeds may be somewhat erratic and open to skepticism, Eliot Rosewater's behavior is a reflection of the fact that he is slightly but harmlessly insane, deluded into believing that his humanitarianism in Rosewater will actually do something to equalize the distribution of wealth. Though his motive and his rationale are admirable, one cannot ignore his insanity or his self-decep-

[183] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 143.

[184] Ibid., p. 142.

[185] Ibid., p. 186.

[186] Ibid., p. 143.

tion. Leslie Fiedler points out that "Eliot Rosewater . . . is the first of Vonnegut's gurus who lives *in* madness rather than *by* lies. He does not . . . choose deliberately to deceive for the sake of salvation of mankind, but is hopelessly self-deceived: insane enough to accept as truth what Rumfoord [in *The Sirens of Titan*] was forced to justify as useful fictions, or Bokonon [in *Cat's Cradle*] to preach as *foma*, 'harmless untruths.'"[187]

What Eliot says and does is questionable because the reader is not always completely certain whether he is mad all of the time, just part of the time, or perhaps not at all. Eliot admits, in a letter to whoever succeeds him as head of the family millions that he regards himself as "a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tinhorn saint, an aimless fool."[188] Before going to Rosewater, Eliot had been under psychiatric analysis, revealing "the most massively defended neurosis [his doctor] . . . ever attempted to treat."[189] At one time in New York Eliot was known to write poetic messages on the walls of public lavatories, such as the following exercise in illogicality: "If you would be unloved and forgotten, be reasonable."[190]

Eliot's psychological problems are twofold: social and personal. On the social level, Eliot is outraged by what the free enterprise system has fostered, and he is appalled by the way in which people waste

[187]Fiedler, p. 204.

[188]Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, p. 14.

[189]Ibid., p. 28.

[190]Ibid., p. 68.

their lives. His perceptions about the modern social follies are not those of a madman but are completely lucid observations about the absurdities of a modern world.

> As for friends who might have helped Eliot through his time of troubles: he didn't have any. He drove away his rich friends by telling them that whatever they had was based on dumb luck. He advised his artist friends that the only people who paid any attention to what they did were rich horses' asses with nothing more athletic to do. He asked his scholarly friends, 'Who has time to read all the boring crap you write and listen to all the boring things you say?' He alienated his friends in the sciences by thanking them extravagantly for scientific advances he had read about in recent newspapers and magazines, by assuring them with a perfectly straight face, that life was getting better and better, thanks to scientific thinking.[191]

Eliot's personal problems are more disturbing than his attempts to solve America's social problems. He has haunting guilt feelings about the past. When he was young he accidentally caused his mother's death in a sailing mishap. During World War II he mistakenly killed three unarmed German firemen, one of whom was only a boy. The guilt he has about these deaths is compounded by his resentment of his father, Senator Lister Ames Rosewater, who symbolizes everything detestable about wealth and political power. "Lister," writes Eliot, "has thought about the effects of his inherited wealth about as much as most men think about their left big toes. The fortune has never amused, worried, or tempted him."[192]

Senator Rosewater, who never really struggled for anything important, believes that "the carrot and the stick had been built into the

[191]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 27.

[192]Ibid., p. 14.

Free Enterprise System, as conceived by the Founding Fathers, but that do-gooders who thought people shouldn't ever have to struggle for anything, had buggered the system of logic beyond all recognition."[193] It is not surprising to learn that the Senator firmly believes that anyone who thinks (as Eliot does) that the world could be helped by the rich redistributing their wealth has gone mad. He is a firm believer in the free enterprise system of government in which everyone supposedly struggles equally in the "sink-or-swim"[194] competition of life. Senator Rosewater, with his total lack of sympathy for what humanitarian things Eliot manages to accomplish in Rosewater, comments, "We come to a supremely ironic moment in history, for Senator Rosewater of Indiana now asks his own son, 'Are you or have you ever been a communist?'"[195] Eliot's reply to his father's loaded question is also Vonnegut's reply.

> Oh, I have what a lot of people would probably call communistic thoughts . . . but, for heaven's sakes, Father, nobody can work with the poor and not fall over Karl Marx from time to time--or just fall over the Bible, as far as that goes. I think it's terrible the way people don't share things in this country. I think it's a heartless government that will let one baby be born owning a big piece of the country, the way I was born, and let another baby be born without owning anything.[196]

On the staircase leading up to his office in Rosewater, Eliot printed the following poem by William Blake, which he broke up so that it would fit the twelve risers.

[193] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 27.

[194] Ibid.

[195] Ibid., p. 87.

[196] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

The Angel
that presided
o'er my
birth said,
"Little creature,
form'd of
Joy & Mirth,
Go love
without the
help of
any Thing
on Earth.[197]

Senator Rosewater wrote a rebuttal to Eliot by inscribing another of Blake's poems at the foot of the stairs.

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.[198]

The poems illustrate the two conflicting and contradictory views of love held by Eliot and his father. William Blake's complete poem "The Clod and the Pebble," from which the Senator quotes only the last stanza, reveals that he has omitted the evidence that Blake had more to say about the two sides of love than the last stanza alone indicates. In his complete poem consisting of three stanzas, Blake presents the self-seeking kind of love as negative, undesirable, but more readily attainable than the kind of love which seeks to please others. The first stanza,

Love seeketh not Itself to please
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.

[197]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 51.

[198]Ibid., p. 52.

presents the positive, desirable, deep kind of love which is so rarely attainable, as the second stanza explains:

> So sang a little clod of clay
> Trodden with the cattle's feet,
> But a Pebble of the brook
> Warbled out these metres meet: . . .[199]

In this poem, Blake suggests that man (being made of clay) is downtrodden in his attempts to find the kind of unselfish love which Eliot Rosewater tries to deliver to the inhabitants of Rosewater, Indiana. The Pebble's warble in the stanza quoted by the Senator indicates that the greedy Hell-building love is the sort that one finds most often, and its perfect, unthinking living example is the Senator himself.

Eliot, in repudiating what his father believes in by going to Rosewater in the first place, comes close to expressing Kurt Vonnegut's own beliefs about money and government, even though Stanley Schatt suggests that Eliot's generosity and love must be qualified because, according to Schatt, "his real reason [for going to Rosewater] is to ameliorate his oppressive burden of guilt."[200] Even before the end of the novel when Eliot winds up in a mental hospital, it is obvious that he is cracking up, that something has "clicked" inside his head indicating that his idealism and his purpose in life have "run down like a wind-up toy."[201] He has a fixation (as does Vonnegut) about the value of volunteer fire departments which are "almost the only examples of

[199]Geoffrey Keynes, ed., Blake: Complete Writings (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 211.

[200]Schatt, Diss. Univ. of So. Cal., p. 167.

[201]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 165.

enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land."[202] When Mary Moody, ("a slut . . . a suspected arsonist, a convicted shoplifter, and a five-dollar whore"[203]) whose children Rosewater had baptized only the day before with a benediction of kindness, calls the Rosewater Foundation on the fire department hot line, Eliot bursts into a stream of invectives indicating his schizoid tendencies. "God damn you for calling this number! You should go to jail and rot! Stupid sons of bitches who make personal calls on a fire department line should go to hell and fry forever!"[204] When the other telephone rings shortly thereafter, Eliot says, completely recovered,

> 'This is the Rosewater Foundation,' said Eliot sweetly. 'How can we help you?'
> 'Mr. Rosewater--this is Mary Moody again.' She was sobbing.
> 'What on earth is the trouble, dear?' He honestly didn't know. He was ready to kill whoever had made her cry.[205]

Belatedly Eliot realizes that the Senator is right when he accuses him of being able to love and help complete strangers but unable to do anything to help those closest to him--his relatives and his wife.

> 'Love!' the Senator echoed bitterly. 'You certainly loved me, didn't you? Loved me so much you smashed up every hope or ideal I ever had. And you certainly loved Sylvia, didn't you?'
> Eliot covered his ears.
> The old man raved on, spraying fine beads of spit. Eliot could not hear the words, but lip-read the terrible story of how he had ruined the life and health of a woman whose only fault had been to love him.[206]

[202]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 184.

[203]Ibid., p. 150.

[204]Ibid.

[205]Ibid.

[206]Ibid., p. 160.

The enormity of the situation is too much for Eliot. He sees how ironic it is to attempt to solve the world's inequities by uncritical love, when he is himself virtually incapable of having a loving, personal relationship with anyone. Even though Eliot resents what the Senator represents, it is obvious that he made no real attempts to come to terms with their differences.

As he leaves Rosewater Eliot ceases to recognize the people he has helped most. He has no regrets about leaving, and he seems, temporarily at least, to lose his philanthropic impulses. Once in the bus on the way to Indianapolis Eliot becomes absorbed in a Kilgore Trout novel about the death of the Milky Way; then he imagines he is witnessing Indianapolis being consumed by a fire storm similar to the one he had read about in Dresden. The fact that Eliot winds up in a mental hospital is no surprise, and yet, even when the doctors pronounce him cured long enough to defend his own sanity, it is clear that Eliot is far from recovery. Reality for Eliot is too unpleasant to face, and his escape is through a kind of semi-insanity from which he would be able to operate at half-speed when he is forced to prove to a court of law that he is sane enough to handle his own fortune. In the meantime Eliot seeks an escape through an imaginative world of fancy. "He wished that he were a dicky bird, so that he could go up into the treetop and never come down. He wanted to fly up so high because there was something going on at ground-zero that did not make him feel good."[207] The realization that his experiment to love and help people who have

[207]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 178.

no use could not go on indefinitely, that it could not block out the inequities of the Senator's "free-enterpriser" world, makes Eliot withdraw into himself.

Whether or not Eliot Rosewater becomes completely sane at the end of the novel is doubtful, as Stanley Schatt has pointed out in his recent dissertation on Vonnegut. At the end of the novel Eliot is seen on the grounds of the mental hospital; he has been told by Kilgore Trout what to say in his own defense at his sanity trial, since he cannot be trusted to remember it long enough on his own. He writes a check for one hundred thousand dollars to buy off Fred Rosewater, and he adopts every child in Rosewater County so that they will be the legal heirs to his fortune. As Stanley Schatt notes, "At this point it is unclear whether Eliot is a saint replete with magic wand and Madonna's smile, a madman still recuperating in a hospital after a complete nervous breakdown, or a sane, repentant man who sees the damage he has done his 'clients' and seeks to rectify it by one last completely unselfish act."[208]

While it does not seem likely, as Stanley Schatt suggests, that Eliot has done some actual "damage" to his "clients" in Rosewater, other than depriving them of his presence, it does seem that if any damage has been done, it is to Eliot himself. His own semi-lucid awareness of the fact that his wife Sylvia has entered a Belgian nunnery, unable to cope with the disasters of life with or without Eliot, is a partial cause of his mental breakdown. Tony Tanner has suggested

[208]Schatt, Diss. Univ. of So. Cal., p. 171.

that the essential question of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is, "Can one indeed operate with any authenticity and wholeness of self anywhere between the convinced selfishness of the Senator's sincere laissez-faire and the uncritical unselfishness of Eliot's anarchic dream of universal kindness and help?"[209]

Vonnegut's social criticism is most obvious in his description of the society around Fred Rosewater, an insurance salesman from Pisquontuit, Rhode Island, who is Eliot's cousin and a contender for the Rosewater millions. Pisquontuit is a haven for the idle rich like Stewart Buntline, whose own existence has nearly ground to a halt. Once a day Buntline's daughter Lila, the local pornography dealer, steals into her father's study just to make sure he is still alive. Buntline's somnolescence is the result of his failure to do anything about the loopholes in the free enterprise system. He wanted to help the poor and the suffering by giving away his fortune. In a sense, Stewart Buntline is in the same position as Eliot Rosewater except that Buntline never went so far as to actually live with people who needed love, money and understanding. His disillusionment comes from the fact that a lawyer named McAllister talked him out of his idealistic notions even before he got the chance to try them out. McAllister points out to young Buntline the ills of welfare in society, but his speech is mostly an attack by Kurt Vonnegut on the conservative viewpoint.

> Have we really helped these people? What can we say to this third generation of people to whom welfare has long since become a way of life. . . . They do not work and will not. Heads down, unmindful, they have neither pride nor self-

[209]Tanner, Critical Quarterly, p. 308.

> respect. They are totally unreliable, not maliciously so, but like cattle who wander aimlessly. Foresight and the ability to reason have simply atrophied from long neglect. . . . You realize with a kind of dull horror that they have lost all semblance of human beings except that they stand on two feet and talk--like parrots. 'More. Give me more. I need more,' are the only new thoughts they have learned. . . . They stand today as a monumental caricature of Homo sapiens, the harsh and horrible reality created by us out of our own misguided pity. . . . Giving away a fortune is a futile and destructive thing. It makes whiners of the poor, without making them rich or even comfortable. . . . Your fortune is the most important single determinant of what you think of yourself and what others think of you.[210]

The great irony is that what McAllister draws such an unflattering picture of is not the poor, it is Stewart Buntline, who, even without welfare turns into a useless human being. At an early age he gives in to the conservative viewpoint uttered by McAllister and sleeps away the unpleasantries of a reality he thinks he can do nothing about.

Buntline's wife, Amanita, is not a very good representative of the upper class either. She claims that "music [is] the most important thing in her life, next to her husband and her daughter."[211] Though she "adores" Beethoven, she is unable to recognize her mistake of playing all nine symphonies on the record player at 78 instead of 33. When she is not driving her powder blue Mercedes Benz, she is escorting one of her Lesbian friends to lunch.

Some of the best social criticism of the idle rich Buntlines comes from their servant girl, Selena Deal. She is an orphan who is required to take an oath every Sunday which reaffirms her duty and obligations

[210] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, pp. 118-19.

[211] Ibid., p. 134.

to be grateful to her conservative benefactors.

> I do solemnly swear that I will respect the sacred private property of others, and that I will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign me to. I will be grateful to those who employ me, and will never complain about wages and hours, but will ask myself instead, 'What can I do for my employer, my republic and my God?'[212]

Selena Deal's oath is a conservative's dream, and the satire Vonnegut presents at the expense of the selfish and overindulged wealthy is well-directed. The servant girl is an example of many poor people who are constantly told in one way or another to respect private property when they cannot afford any themselves, to be grateful for the gratuities of the rich when they see that there is little chance to get the same privileges and pleasures for themselves, to express thankfulness for a job even when it involves poor wages and hours and takes away one's dignity, and to be certain that they, unlike their wealthy "betters," are not placed on Earth to be happy, but to be tested. As Selena Deal comments, "What gets me most about [the Buntlines] . . . isn't how ignorant they are, or how much they drink. It's the way they have of thinking that everything in the world is a gift to the poor people from them or their ancestors."[213] The irony and the humor which underlies her observations is that what she criticizes about Pisquontuit and its wealthy inhabitants is not just a reflection of ingratitude or a "case of pearls before swine."[214] She realizes that the "pearls" given her by the Buntlines do not really include such things as the ocean, the

[212]Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 133.

[213]Ibid., p. 137.

[214]Ibid.

moon, the stars, and the U.S. Constitution, even though it is convenient for them to think so.

Bunny Weeks, owner of "The Weir" restaurant in Pisquontuit, and Harry Pena, an ex-insurance salesman who turned to commercial fishing, are two other individuals from the novel worth mentioning in connection with Vonnegut's social criticism. Harry Pena and his two burly sons make their living in an honest, natural way, thumbing their noses at the wealthy. "All three," Vonnegut explains, "were as satisfied with life as man can ever be."[215] Bunny Weeks is a homosexual and the director of a bank as well as a restaurant owner. Harpoons from Moby Dick's fatal encounter with one of Weeks' whaling relatives decorate the restaurant overlooking Harry Pena's fish traps. Decadent, leisured guests look through opera glasses at Harry and his boys, who are the local representatives of the working class, seemingly fishing for the entertainment of the restaurant customers. When they are not gawking at someone else working, the people in the restaurant can eat Bunny Weeks' "Fisherman's Salad, a peeled banana thrust through a pineapple ring, set in a nest of chilled, creamed tuna and curly coconut shreds."[216] Vonnegut's sexual symbolism in connection with Bunny Weeks and Harry Pena is obvious, right down to their own names. Though one is tempted to admire Harry and his way of life, Bunny informs the reader that he knows Harry is bankrupt. What Pena symbolizes is a way of life which has become impossible in modern technological society. As

[215] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 130.

[216] Ibid., p. 123.

Bunny explains, "'Real people don't make their livings that way any more. Those three romantics out there make as much sense as Marie Antoinette and her milkmaids. When the bankruptcy proceedings begin--in a week, a month, a year--they'll find out that their only economic value was as animated wallpaper for my restaurant here.' Bunny, to his credit, was not happy about this. 'That's all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not needed.'"[217] Pathetically, Bunny Weeks suggests that the Harry Penas are life's losers, while his own customers, inheritors and "beneficiaries of boodles and laws that had nothing to do with wisdom or work,"[218] are life's winners.

The whole episode involving the Buntlines, Bunny Weeks and Harry Pena is in apposition to the main story which revolves around Eliot Rosewater's utopian dreams. Typically, Vonnegut criticizes both Eliot's activities involving idealistic brotherly love and the social theories of the conservative, wealthy, inactive few. Neither Eliot nor the other provide a satisfactory answer to the social problems of modern man, even though Eliot's motivations are more admirable. Max F. Schultz writes that the title of the novel gives one a general indication of the two sides of society and the two opposing ideologies Vonnegut presents. The first half of the title "('God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater') remind[s] us of Christ's teachings on love, and the second half ('Or Pearls Before Swine') reiterate[s] the Sermon on the Mount's warning

[217] Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 131.

[218] Ibid.

against wasting the gift of the Kingdom of Heaven on those who will not enter it."[219]

[219]Schultz, Critique, p. 8.

CHAPTER VI

WAR: THERE IS NOTHING INTELLIGENT TO SAY ABOUT A MASSACRE

To a black humorist like Kurt Vonnegut, war is the ultimate absurdity in life. Man's intelligence appears to be increasingly fixated on the conduct of bigger and better wars which suggests that society is more concerned with better death than with better life. Death, of course, is part of war and always has been--that is the unhappy fact of the nature of war. The absurdity of war stems from man's inability to deal in rational terms with mass death and destructiveness. Vonnegut treats war and death with varying amounts of black humor because he knows that he might as well write an anti-glacier book as an anti-war one, since wars are about as easy to stop as glaciers. "And," writes Vonnegut, "even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death."[220]

In a universe which is seen as meaningless, which refuses to yield to man a rational explanation for the human condition, it seems obvious that man's struggle for meaning will not be made any easier by war. Dying, after all, does not give life meaning--it is simply the end of life. War does not make anyone's brief life any better--it does not give man an ultimate purpose. As Alfred Kazin notes, war is absurd: "Above all, we have had the sense of a world made totally absurd; war has become the normal, omnipresent condition of daily living, dominating

[220]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 3.

a whole generation by the terror of its own weapons, and by the visible undoing, in its preparations for war, of all those human loyalties and common values in the name of which war used to be fought."[221]

The use of black humor in writing about war is essential for Vonnegut because the realities of war and the implications of a perpetually bellicose society are too hideous for human endurance without the escape of laughter. Black humor recognizes and expresses the ugliness of war by treating it as an absurd and ultimately meaningless reality. Black humor runs consistently throughout all of Vonnegut's novels, but it is used to its best effect when dealing with war. In Slaughterhouse-Five for example, Vonnegut relates the death of Edgar Derby, a man shot for the ridiculous act of stealing a teapot. The wartime illogic of one man's punishment for a simple act of petty theft is heightened by the fact that other men during a war can commit the most appalling acts of atrocity and never be called to account for them.[222] At the same time, and without a trace of guilt, allied forces massacred thousands of Dresdeners mercilessly. The complete futility and idiocy of war is heightened by the suspension of all morality and by man's inability to

[221]Alfred Kazin, "The War Novel: From Mailer to Vonnegut," Saturday Review, Feb. 6, 1971, p. 14.

[222]Roland Weary and Paul Lazzaro are two examples of unmitigated evil and bestiality who go unpunished during wartime. Weary is a sadist whose enjoyment consists in the possession of such torturing weapons as a knife with a triangular-shaped blade which leaves a wound that will not close, and in his pride in knowing what the "blood gutter" of a sword is all about. Lazzaro is a revenge-bent maniac who makes a list of his personal enemies to kill (including Billy Pilgrim) after the war. He is the proud possessor of a quart jar of jewels stolen from dead people after the Dresden bombing.

make sense out of any such episodes. As Vonnegut remarks, "The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad."[223] In the face of annihilation and total destruction, modern man, if he is to remain sane, must learn to laugh at the horrors he has brought upon himself.

There is no doubt about Kurt Vonnegut's attitude toward war. He detests it and his antipathy begins with his personal experience. That World War II and the witnessing of the Dresden bombing profoundly affected him is evident in nearly all his writing. War is the major theme in three novels (Slaughterhouse-Five, Mother Night, Cat's Cradle), it is heavily satirized in two other novels (The Sirens of Titan, Player Piano), and it is a minor though not an insignificant part of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. In no novel does Vonnegut actually describe a war in the way a typical "war novel" describes battles, marches, wounds, suffering, and so on. Even in Slaughterhouse-Five, which is essentially about the Dresden bombing, Vonnegut avoids going into a detailed account of the holocaust. He tells the reader that after the bombing, Dresden looked like the surface of the moon, the sky was black, and the sun was "an angry little pinhead."[224] With a setting like Dresden, so overpowering in its reflection of man's inhumanity, Vonnegut admits that the creation of credible characters is a problem. He

[223] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 4.

[224] Ibid., p. 153.

explains that "there are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of economic forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters."[225]

There are several additional reasons for Vonnegut's refusal to create characters who give eye-witness accounts of war and his avoidance of describing actual war events. In the first place, words can never be adequate to give another person a realistic account of the horrifying aspects of war. Secondly, the lasting trauma of being involved in a war makes objectivity and authorial distancing practically impossible; this is why Vonnegut relies to some extent on science fiction devices. And finally, as Alfred Kazin suggests, "Vonnegut's evasion of any realistic description seems typical of the purely moral, unpolitical, widespread American sense of futility about our government's having made war in and on Indochina for an entire decade. Vietnam now colors all our thinking about earlier wars. Until Vietnam, Americans did not fully take it in that theirs was a permanent war economy, totally bureaucratized for war, prepared to make war endlessly."[226] War is big business, a vast, tangled bureaucracy of technology, science and administration. People find themselves seriously wondering if society would make it economically without the energies expended in the development, production, management and delivery of war materials.

[225]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, pp. 140-41.

[226]Kazin, p. 36.

Until atom bombs were dropped during World War II, death had never before been delivered with such energy and swiftness. Before man became so proficient at killing, wars meant much more to the individual because they were fought on a man-to-man basis and one could usually recognize the enemy by his uniform or his language. Now the "personal" aspects of war are obsolete. Weapons requiring personal skill like the bow and arrow have long since been replaced by sophisticated machine guns which spray death in short automatic bursts. One man flying a bomber can wipe out thousands of people at once without ever having to undergo the painful experience of confronting the enemy face-to-face. Pilots and anyone else, including children, can easily see the aftermath of bombing missions on television, where the shocking reality of war becomes truly absurd by its depersonalization. In Slaughterhouse-Five Kurt Vonnegut explains that in 1932 the science-fiction novelist Kilgore Trout wrote a book called The Gutless Wonder. It "predicted the widespread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings. It was dropped on them from airplanes. Robots did the dropping. They had no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground."[227] Kilgore Trout's science-fiction is painfully close to reality with the possible exception of the robots. In the real world, people who are seemingly without conscience make and deliver these hideous weapons.

Kurt Vonnegut does not always rely solely on the character Kilgore Trout to present his satire on the military mentality. He also uses

[227]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 144.

authorial comments, although they are seldom so outspoken about the Vietnam War as in the following criticism of a military officer's assumption that more bombing will free Vietnam from the Communists: "The speaker at the Lions Club meeting was a major in the Marines. He said that the Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries. . . . He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason."[228] The absurdity of such a line of non-reasoning should be obvious, since Vonnegut's view is that it makes little difference as to who is doing the bombing since the result is always the same--death, destruction, and, in this case, the insanity of a small country having to pick up the pieces after two major world powers have argued over economic advantages and ideological differences.

An individual's behavior in war is not admirable or praiseworthy, according to Vonnegut. There are no real heroes in a war. He would agree with the following perceptions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the protagonist of Mother Night: "The people . . . succeeding in a brave new world were, after all, being rewarded as specialists in slavery, destruction, and death. I don't consider people who work in those fields successful."[229] In Player Piano, Vonnegut satirizes a barber who delivers a long harangue lamenting the fact that the age of heroism is past. He claims that wars make heroes of men, that they give men a

[228]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 52.

[229]Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. 91.

chance to be somebody. "And another nice thing about war--" the barber comments with unconscious irony, "not that anything about war is nice, I guess--is that while it's going on and you're in it, you never worry about doing the right thing."[230] The implication is that war somehow seems to justify the suspension of moral and ethical value judgements. Vonnegut's irony is that ultimately, there is nothing "right" about any war.

One of the difficulties in writing about war is the futility of trying to assign moral responsibility or blame to one particular part of society or another. In all of Vonnegut's novels, however, it is evident that he allocates a large part of the responsibility to science. Modern society's fixations on death-dealing bombs and the continual research projects which look for maiming, paralyzing gasses and germs have made Earth a giant laboratory for developing newer and better ways to die. Vonnegut shows that there is even some black humor to be seen in wartime scientific overachievement. The weapons scientific "know-how" invents frequently prove to be monsters which serve the wrong ends and have the opposite effects from those intended. In Slaughterhouse-Five a gun developed for annihilating the enemy with a stream of fire becomes an absurd war toy which does exactly the opposite of what it is supposed to: "The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The gun lapped up snow and vegetation with a blowtorch thirty feet long. The flame left a black arrow on the

[230]Vonnegut, Player Piano, p. 197.

ground, showing the Germans exactly where the gun was hidden."[231]

In Cat's Cradle Vonnegut's anti-war views are inextricably woven into his condemnation of irresponsible scientists like Dr. Felix Hoenikker, whose clever invention of ice-nine destroys the world. Science has a heavy burden of guilt placed upon it for contributing to the stockpile of nuclear weapons and other types of war instruments. Vonnegut shows an outspoken distaste for man's ability to forget the ugliness of war, and for man's unwillingness to learn from the mistakes of previous wars. In Cat's Cradle the American ambassador to San Lorenzo, Horlick Minton, is to cast a memorial wreath into the sea commemorating San Lorenzo's loss of three hundred men in World War II. The men had been on a ship bound for the United States, but ironically, it was sunk by a German submarine just off the San Lorenzan coast. Instead of delivering his prepared speech, Ambassador Minton says what he (and Vonnegut) really thinks.

> If we are to pay our sincere respects to the hundred lost children of San Lorenzo . . . we might best spend the day despising what killed them; which is to say, the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind. Perhaps, when we remember wars, we should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns.[232]

Though science plays a big part in wars by developing weapons and by the failure of many scientists to be truly concerned about the non-academic uses to which some of their inventions may be put, there are many other contributing factors. The history of mankind, for example,

[231] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 30.

[232] Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 170.

is not memorable for its peacetime activities, but for its wars. ("'History!' writes Bokonon. 'Read it and weep.'")[233] Always, it seems, modern man must live under a war cloud which is limitless, meaningless and absurd. Only when there are no longer enough people alive to fight, one suspects, will the threatening prospects of war disappear. The remoteness, unreality, and unlikelihood of such a thing as world peace and brotherhood have made some people believe that it is folly to think that man is capable of ever living without war. There have been many practical suggestions as well as some wild speculations about how to bring an end to wars. In The Sirens of Titan Kurt Vonnegut satirizes the notion that peace will come to Earth not by man's inner conviction that all wars are avoidable, but by some outside, extraterrestrial means such as an invasion from outer space.

Vonnegut reveals in The Sirens of Titan what would happen to Earth if it were suddenly attacked by an army from Mars. Winston Niles Rumfoord organizes the Martian Army with the vain hope that a surprise attack on Earth would shock people enough to weld them into a "monolithic Brotherhood of Man."[234] Rumfoord wanted to change the world for the better by instigating "the great and unforgettable suicide of Mars. As he says in his Pocket History of Mars: 'Any man who would change the World in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people's blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repugnance and horror that usually follows

[233]Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle, p. 168.

[234]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 175.

bloodshed.'"[235] Rumfoord has all of those qualities, as well as the new religion. The only thing which keeps his mad plan from becoming too closely paralleled with what real people do in real life is that Vonnegut reminds his readers occasionally that Rumfoord operates within the surrealistic realm of science fiction. Nevertheless, the parallels between the fictive world and the real world of human experience are there and Vonnegut's satirical technique is what keeps his criticism of war from becoming too accusatory, too bitter, or sheer polemic.

Like most armies, Rumfoord's Martian Army has a morale-boosting war chant which spells out their intentions.

> Terror, grief and desolation . . .
> Come to every Earthling nation. . . !
> Earth eat fire! Earth wear chains. . . !
> Break Earth's spirit, spill Earth's brains. . . !
> Scream. . . !
> Bleed. . . !
> Die. . . !
> Doooooooooommmmmmmmm.[236]

The black humor of such a preposterous war chant is partly due to its tone of childish primitivism. The humor tends to obscure the ugly aspects of waging death and destruction which the chant glorifies. The invasion from outer space led by Rumfoord is an unfortunate disaster. Vonnegut suggests that those individuals who have hopes that outer space dwellers will someday unify mankind will be sadly disappointed. As far as anyone can ascertain, no such expedition will suddenly bring peace. Earth, Vonnegut explains, failed to appreciate Rumfoord's plan for brotherhood of man. When Mars attacked they retaliated with nearly

[235] Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 174.

[236] Ibid., p. 135.

every weapon in existence. "Earth's glorious victory over Mars had been a tawdry butchery of virtually unarmed saints, saints who had waged feeble war on Earth. . . ."[237] If there is to be any brotherhood of man, man must instigate it from within himself, not wait for some outside circumstances to force it on him.

Mother Night is a novel which deals with war somewhat differently. Rather than directly commenting on the horrors of World War II, Kurt Vonnegut explores the problems of individual moral responsibility, guilt and identity, which, in this novel, are problems closely associated with war. More is revealed about the individual Howard W. Campbell, Jr., how he is compromised and how he compromises himself during and after World War II than what is actually said about the war itself. Black humor is less frequent in Mother Night than in Vonnegut's other novels (though some can be found, especially within the confines of the absurd White Christian Minutemen organization which befriends Campbell in New York, and in Campbell's discussion of the writing of war memoirs with Adolf Eichmann, for example). Perhaps the reason for so little humor is that there is nothing particularly amusing about the whole Nazi business which is at the heart of this novel.

Writing his confessional-autobiography, Howard W. Campbell reveals himself to be a playwright, a "broadcaster of Nazi propaganda to the English-speaking world"[238] and an American agent whose radio broadcasts carried coded information out of Germany. When the war ended he was

[237]Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan, p. 175.

[238]Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. 33.

allowed to escape Germany, the treason case against him was dropped though he was never publicly acknowledged as an American agent. Eventually, after living fifteen years in a New York attic, he was brought to Israel to be tried for war crimes. Because of the clandestine nature of Campbell's work, there is some confusion about his real identity, and about which one of the many selves he adopts is the true one. The fact that Campbell makes a career out of lying, fabrication and deception makes everything he says and does open to doubt. Max F. Schultz claims that the nature of this novel, its confusing construction, and the inconsistencies within Howard W. Campbell as a character whose credibility is dubious, make Vonnegut's thesis cloudy and impossible to confirm. "Mother Night ostensibly explores the contemporary problems of guilt and identity, but with equally disquieting inconclusiveness, blandly suggesting the probable irrelevance of any answer we might conjugate to these important questions."[239]

Campbell recognizes the terrible truth about people during a war--that they will hate and kill one another gladly when they feel justified in doing so. "I doubt if there ever has been a society that has been without strong and young people eager to experiment with homicide, provided no very awful penalties are attached to it."[240] At all times one is aware that Campbell seems to know the extent of his own contributions to a society bent on fostering hate and evil. But ironically, the dedication of the novel indicates that Campbell's awareness of his

[239]Schultz, Critique, p. 21.

[240]Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. 120.

own atrocities does not excuse them but only magnifies them. "This book is dedicated to Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times."[241] He broadcasts the most heinous lies and he is very good at writing the kind of anti-Semitic propaganda the Nazis demand. His job emphasizes his belief that the world is diseased and that people are willing to believe the lies of propaganda. "I had hoped, as a broadcaster, to be merely ludicrous, but this is a hard world to be ludicrous in, with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate. So many people wanted to believe me! Say what you will about the sweet miracle of unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity for it terrifying and absolutely vile."[242]

Underneath all the Nazi falsity Campbell delivers rests the assumption that he is supposedly helping the Allies via his coded messages. The trouble is that Campbell's lies carried more weight in the public market than his truths. Because he was so expert and effective in his propagandist duties Campbell is guilty of the worst kind of inhumanity and irresponsibility. Jerry Bryant comments that "for all intents and purposes Campbell was a hatemonger. By acting as he did, he provided the Germans with a justification for the atrocities against the Jews, thus contributing indirectly to those atrocities. Whatever small good he did as an American agent was more than offset by the evil he did in his pretense. As Camus argues in The Rebel, murder or its advocacy is

[241] Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. xiii.

[242] Ibid., p. 120.

never justifiable."[243]

The fact that there is a disparity between what Campbell says, does, and apparently believes, leaves doubts about his moral guilt or innocence. The existence of his apologia indicates his recognition of guilt, and yet practically his entire existence denies that he felt much anxiety about his Nazi activities. Campbell's maintenance of more than one identity is, he claims, part of the schizophrenic nature of people which permits them to live with themselves while doing things they despise. The adoption of various identities, however, is Campbell's moral nemesis. In the "Introduction" to Mother Night, Vonnegut claims that the moral of his novel is, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."[244]

Vonnegut suggests that no matter what identity one consciously adopts, the moral responsibility for all one's behavior cannot be shirked or ignored. Campbell, then, is never allowed to rest by thinking that what he has pretended to be (a Nazi agent) which furthered German atrocities was simply a harmless necessity of war. He cannot be vindicated, nor can he vindicate himself, as his decision to commit suicide at the end of the novel indicates. "Vonnegut dramatizes Campbell's apologia as a fabrication of the modern totalitarian mind unable to distinguish clearly between truth and falsity, while mitigating his offenses by portraying him as no worse than the rest of society and possibly better

[243]Bryant, The Open Decision, p. 314.

[244]Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. v.

in that he accepts his burden of guilt."[245]

Campbell avoids looking at the nasty realities of the war his broadcasts aid and abet by tuning everything out except his love for his wife. "Away from the soverign territory of our nation of two, we talked like the patriotic lunatics all around us."[246] Ultimately, however, there is no lasting solace in love. The fact that Campbell is aware of his own hypocrisy is an indication that he recognizes his irresponsibility, and yet the inviolate self cannot hold up against the incursions of moral guilt and inhumanity. Campbell's adoption of so many identities is proof of the fact that he no longer has a real identity. The playwright, the lover, the truth-teller, and the propagandist are all identities denied him as an ultimate refuge. As Jerome Klinkowitz explains, "Where lies the cause for the loss of the self? Vonnegut answers that the very cause may be found in the traditional notion of the inviolate self. Because men have abandoned all else and have selfishly fled to their selves as the romantic center of the universe, when the self collapses, everything, quite literally, is lost. This is what Vonnegut's character finally realizes."[247]

The complexity of war morality is not unravelled in Mother Night, though it is tempting to make absolute value judgements on the detestable war crimes of Howard W. Campbell, Jr. Two guards who talk to Campbell in his jail cell in Israel seem to symbolize another aspect of

[245] Schultz, p. 22.

[246] Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. 44.

[247] Klinkowitz, Critique, p. 45.

the moral dichotomy within this novel. Andor Gutman explains to Campbell that during his two years at Auschwitz he had seen many men, including himself, volunteer for the "Sonderkommando"[248]--prisoners who were killed after they performed their duties of leading the condemned to the gas chambers and then removing their bodies. Gutman seems to be at a loss to explain this voluntary act, except that after two years of listening to a loudspeaker declare that the purpose of Auschwitz "was to kill human beings by the millions . . . the position of corpse-carrier suddenly sounded like a good job."[249] Was Gutman's volunteering an immoral act? He thinks so. "I will always be ashamed. Volunteering for the Sonderkommando--it was a very shameful thing to do."[250]

The other guard, Arpand Kovacs, exclaims that the most immoral act during a war is to do nothing at all. Having read some of Campbell's confessions, he "praised them for what he imagined to be in them."[251]

> 'Give it to the complacent bastards!' he said. . . . 'Tell those smug briquets!' By briquets he meant people who did nothing to save their own lives or anybody else's life when the Nazis took over, who were willing to go meekly all the way to the gas chambers, if that was where the Nazis wanted them to go. A briquet, of course, is a molded piece of coal dust, the soul of convenience where transportation, storage and combustion are concerned.[252]

The two guards express the dilemma of wartime behavior; the immorality

[248] Vonnegut, Mother Night, p. 20.

[249] Ibid., p. 21.

[250] Ibid., p. 21.

[251] Ibid., p. 22.

[252] Ibid.

of both action and inaction, decision and indecision, and the absurdity of condemning either one.

Perhaps Kurt Vonnegut's ideas about war are best shown in his "war novel" Slaughterhouse-Five, which is primarily the result of Vonnegut's reflections on his own experiences during the Dresden fire-bombing.

> 'How the hell do I feel about burning down that city?' Vonnegut asked himself in a 1971 article in New York Times Magazine. 'I don't know. The burning of the cities was in response to the savagery of the Nazis, and fair really was fair, except that it gets confusing when you see the victims. That sort of arithmetic is disturbing. When I finally came home from the war, I was upset about it because what we had seen cleaning out the shelters was as funny as what we would have seen cleaning out the crematoria. How do you balance off Dresden against Auschwitz? Do you balance it off; or is it all so absurd it's silly to talk about?'[253]

In writing Slaughterhouse-Five Vonnegut shows the ultimate meaninglessness of war as well as the impossibility of dealing with megadeath in rational terms. Vonnegut comments in this novel that he feels like Lot's wife when he looks back on all the destruction of the war. It is humanly impossible not to look back at the awful reality, and yet that backward glance does not help in trying to come to terms with what the war represents. "I've finished my war book now," Vonnegut said. "The next one I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt."[254]

The novel's subtitle, The Children's Crusade, refers to Vonnegut's promise to a friend that his novel would not be a glorification of war, but a crusade to keep more children from being killed by wars. "The

[253]Todd, N.Y. Times Magazine, p. 19.

[254]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 19.

horrors of World War II and the Children's Crusade should be seen as perpetually fresh. Yet, Vonnegut suggests, most men are protectively, intentionally, numb to them. If the numbness is necessary to endure life, it also encourages the repetition of atrocities, the decking out of cruelty in self-justifying disguises--the grossest of which is the ennoblement of war."[255]

"Slaughterhouse-Five" is the name of a meat locker in which Kurt Vonnegut and other prisoners of war were sheltered during the raid on Dresden. The experience of being underground, hearing the bombs being dropped overhead, and imagining the terrible effects of those bombs is not easy to write about. Vonnegut's reason for avoiding an exact description of his experience is that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet about a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?'"[256] One of the most disturbing things about the destruction of Dresden is that it served no purpose; it was not even a military necessity, as has been proven countless times, even by military historians.

In Slaughterhouse-Five Kurt Vonnegut once again relies on black humor and science fiction to give him a way of writing about death and annihilation without giving in to morbidity or pathos. It would be

[255]Anon., "The Price of Survival," rev. of Slaughterhouse-Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Time, April 11, 1969, p. 106.

[256]Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 17.

impossible to write a realistic novel about what a city looks like with thousands and thousands of corpses and rubble strewn about everywhere, so Vonnegut places part of his novel at a distance only slightly removed from straight reality. As he explains on the novel's title page, "This is a Novel Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet Tralfamadore, Where the Flying Saucers Come From. Peace." Vonnegut does not even try to come to an adequate description of the tragedy he felt and saw during the war. As Alfred Kazin has commented, the whole experience "is simply viewed as too much for all of us, whether to remember, record, or understand."[257] Some of the science-fiction techniques Vonnegut uses are familiar from his other novels. Death, for example, is seen from a Tralfamadorian viewpoint which makes it less traumatic than it might otherwise be.

> 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. . . . When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is, 'So it goes.'[258]

The protagonist of Slaughterhouse-Five is an apathetic, passive character named Billy Pilgrim who wanders in and out of the real world, and travels between Earth and the planet Tralfamador. Through him, Vonnegut mixes fantasy with reality in relating his own account of the war, and he tells his readers that Billy Pilgrim's ability to travel in

[257] Kazin, p. 15.

[258] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 23.

time is a result of all his jarring war experiences. Billy is unable to cope with the harshness of the real world, and his retreat into the surrealistic, conscienceless world is what Tony Tanner has described as an escape into quietism: "Conscience simply cannot cope with events like the concentration camps and the Dresden air-raid, and the more general demonstration by the war of the utter valuelessness of human life. Even to try to begin to care adequately would lead to an instant and irrevocable collapse of consciousness. Billy Pilgrim, Everyman, needs his fantasies to offset such facts."[259] In spite of Billy's need for the comforts of the Tralfamadorian philosophy, one is never sure when Billy's fantastic time-distorting processes end and reality begins. There is always the lingering suspicion that Billy, like Eliot Rosewater, is slightly insane. Billy, in fact, meets Rosewater in the mental hospital where Rosewater introduces Billy to the science-fiction world of Kilgore Trout's novels. "Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war."[260] Science fiction (for Vonnegut as well as Trout, Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater) helps them "to re-invent themselves and their universe."[261] It makes pain, suffering, and death trivial.

Billy Pilgrim's existence in a time warp allows him to exist on three levels: the past--Dresden during the war, the present--Ilium,

[259] Tanner, Critical Quarterly, p. 313.

[260] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 87.

[261] Ibid.

New York, as a politically conservative optometrist with a wife and children, and the future--the timeless, deathless Tralfamadore where he was displayed naked in a zoo and mated with the Earthling moviestar Montana Wildhack. With his futuristic vision Billy is able to see his own death as well as the destiny of the United States, which is communicated through Vonnegut's subtle suggestion that the imagined fate might become a reality if war does not cease. Billy sees that "the United States of America has been Balkanized, has been divided into twenty petty nations so that it will never again be a threat to world peace. Chicago has been hydrogen-bombed by angry Chinamen. So it goes."[262] The time-warp also enables Billy to see things backwards. He becomes unstuck in time while watching a television movie about the bombing of Dresden and he sees the whole episode in reverse. "The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes."[263] This incredible reinactment-in-reverse is not only Billy's escape from his experience cleaning up the dead after the bombs fell, it is Vonnegut's way of suggesting the impossibility of undoing, in reality, the damage and the implication that war makes more sense seen backwards.

The true horror of war, to Kurt Vonnegut, is partly its violence, insanity and its cruelty, but it is also man's failure to accept a

[262] Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 123.

[263] Ibid., p. 64.

moral responsibility for his own illogical, valueless acts. Vonnegut presents characters like Billy Pilgrim, Howard W. Campbell and Eliot Rosewater, who retreat from reality into fantasy and dreams. Like many others, these characters see no meaning to war. It is a "hopeless inevitability which would be futile to change. Vonnegut has . . . total sympathy with such quietistic impulses. At the same time his whole work suggests that if man doesn't do something about the conditions and quality of human life on Earth, no-one and nothing else will."[264]

In his criticism of war, Vonnegut shows that if man is to survive on Earth in any meaningful sense, he must learn to improve life, not destroy it. Within the individual rests the capacity to choose peace rather than war, to give a positive value to man's purpose on Earth rather than a negative one, to search for a meaning in life through such things as love, kindness, and sharing rather than to negate any meaning one might give life through war and violence. For Vonnegut and modern man there can be no beneficial wars. If science and technology are misdirected into perpetrating death and dehumanization, it is up to man to see that better conditions for life are brought about.

[264]Tanner, p. 314.

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